



FIVE HOT WAYS TO BEAT THE HEAT IN THE GARDEN AND “FIRESCAPE” YOUR LANDSCAPE

Tesselaar Plants Shares Expert Tips for Plant Selection, Placement and Upkeep

August 7, 2013 – With wildfires and record-high temperatures the cause of so much damage out West, including the loss of hundreds of homes in Colorado Springs, the death of 19 firefighters in Arizona and wildfire damage in all 50 states, Tesselaar Plants went to the experts for tips on how to beat the heat in the garden and help prevent wildfires.

“This trend of heat and drought is why ‘firescaping’ – or fire-safe landscaping – has become so popular,” said Anthony Tesselaar, cofounder and president of international garden plant marketer Tesselaar Plants. “It’s also why we’ve rounded up this list of expert strategies for helping your garden deal with the heat and risk of fire.”

Pros offering the following tips include Dave Egbert, a California firefighter and gardener who runs the website FiresafeGardens.com; JoAnne Skelly, a firescaping educator with the “Living with Fire” program run by the University of Nevada’s Cooperative Extension in Carson City; and Scott Cohen of Green Scene Landscaping and Pools in Los Angeles.

“Fire safety at home has become a hot topic for rural and suburban gardeners as the number of homes destroyed by raging wildfires has increased,” said Egbert in “Fire-Safe Favorites,” an article in the fall 2012 issue of *Pacific Horticulture* magazine. “The fire-safe garden can be a rich and colorful landscape, offering year-round interest and beauty while doubling as an important tool in the fight against wildfires.”

1. Remove fire hazards

While it may seem like a no-brainer, it’s important to continually check for and remove easily-flammable and ignitable materials on and around your house – especially anything within 30 feet. “Doing this will greatly minimize the chance of a burning ember setting your property ablaze,” said Skelly.

This means removing any dead or drought-stressed vegetation from your landscape, gutters and roof as well as plants, shrubs and trees that produce combustible materials like dead branches, needles, pinecones and leaves. Skelly also recommends regular prunings at the appropriate times and, when planting trees, keeping in mind their mature height and width so limbs are kept at least 15 feet away from power lines, chimneys and other structures.

Likewise, said Egbert, flammable materials on or around your house – like wooden shingles, outdoor furniture and mulch – should be replaced with nonflammable ones. Stacked wood and scrap lumber piles should be moved at least 30 feet away from the house.

Egbert also suggests installing fire-resistant surfaces and finishes, minimizing roof eaves and removing overhanging decks and fencing. Any trees within 100 feet of the home should have limbs removed up to 10 feet off the ground.

2. Choose the right plants

“When temperatures hit the high 90s and even three digits,” said Tesselaar, “it’s wise to have some drought- and heat-resistant plants in your garden. He recommends sedum, stonecrop, verbena, coneflowers, lantana, ornamental grasses, phormiums (New Zealand flax), salvia, yucca (Adams Needle from plant developer Monrovia is a great choice) and [Festival™ cordyline](#). Easy-care, drought-tolerant shrubs include potentilla, barberry, buddleia, boxwood, cotoneaster, juniper, and witch hazel. Easy-to-grow annuals that survive in drought conditions include geraniums, ageratum, calendula, cosmos, snapdragons, and Dusty Miller.

[Flower Carpet™](#) roses are also drought tolerant once established. “Even though we had temperatures of 113 degrees for several days and no rain, all I did was water them very well once a week, and they performed beautifully,” reported Carrie Glenn of Howe, Oklahoma (Zone 6b), a Tesselaar Plants home garden tester.

As firescaping becomes increasingly popular, so too, have the number of plants identified or marketed as fire-safe. But Skelly warns that such proclamations come via anecdotal evidence, not scientific testing, and that lists of such plants vary from state to state.

“We try to encourage people to use plants that are deciduous instead of evergreen, shorter instead of taller, herbaceous instead of woody and free of waxes, oils and resins,” she said.

“Traditional firescaping plants have included succulents like cacti, sedum and ice plant,” said Tesselaar, “but there are many more fire-safe plants than you may realize.” Monrovia, he noted, lists 812 firescaping or “firewise” varieties on its website – from agapanthus (or Lily of the Nile) like the sturdy [Storm™](#) series to cannas like the colorful [Tropicanna®](#) to fragrant phlox like the [Volcano®](#) line.

Egbert, who lives on the Big Sur coast of California, recommends ‘Roger’s Red’, an especially red form of the California grape, California fuchsia (hummingbird trumpet), ‘Catalina’ epilobium, agastache (hummingbird mint), garden asters, Flower Carpet Red® groundcover roses, UC Verde® buffalo grass, spreading prickly pear and seasonal flowering bulbs.

Cohen likes new twists on old standbys, like ‘Hummel’s Sunset’, a colorful variegated version of *Crassula ovata* (jade plant or money tree); ‘Sunburst’ aeonium and ‘Kitten Ears’ tradescantia (which works well as a groundcover or in a hanging basket).

3. Open it up

Another sure-fire firescaping strategy involves designing more open space into the landscape. Throughout the property, Cohen recommends vegetation-free strips as fuel breaks to slow or stop a blaze. “These can be decorative rock gardens, faux riverbeds, water features or decomposed granite walkways.”

Similarly, Skelly advises maintaining a separation between layers of vegetation, to eliminate a “ladder of fuels.” Less is better, she says: “Simplify visual lines and groupings. Create islands of plants with lots of open space between.”

But Egbert cautions against clearing vegetation all the way down to bare soil, which can encourage erosion and the growth of weeds.

“A bonus to opening up your landscape is that you’ll find you’ve simplified things,” added Tesselaar. “The breaks in vegetation can add interesting elements to the landscape and overall, it can become more peaceful and relaxing to look at and maintain.”

4. Get in the “zone”

Some plants are wired by Mother Nature to withstand the heat. “I call them the ‘ultimate fighters’ of the horticulture world,” said Tesselaar. “It’s also a good idea to simply pay attention to what works in your hardiness zone.”

“If you’re looking to add some ‘ultimate fighters’ to your garden, the first step is to look at neighboring gardens to see what seems to be holding up well and what’s struggling,” added Tesselaar. “Your local garden centers can also provide advice about tried-and-true plants that perform best in your area, especially in harsh conditions.”

Cohen creates fire-safe landscapes by dividing the area around the home into concentric zones. These self-designed zones provide a strategy for planning your landscape. The closer the zones are to the structure, suggested Cohen, the stricter the fire suppression guidelines should be.

For example, Cohen calls the 30-foot area closest to the house “Zone 1.” This area is reserved for the heaviest landscape editing, the most vigilant pruning and cleanup and the most fire-resistant plants (in his area, this includes agapanthus, ‘Pixie’ gazania, red hot poker, California fuchsia and pittosporum in addition to a well-watered lawn of creeping red fescue). The next 30 to 100 feet – “Zone 2” – should have low-growing ground covers and succulents (he uses colorful drifts of dwarf oleander, sedum, jade plant and miniature ice plant) to prevent ground fires from racing to Zone 1.

Zone 3, says Cohen, should be a 50-foot-deep area with drought-resistant, reduced-fuel shrubs like rock rose and well-watered flowers like yarrow and California poppies. In Zone 4, about 150 feet away from the house, Cohen focuses more on selective removal of fire-prone plants and the cleanup and pruning of what remains: “Trim plantings in order to create groups of native plants 20 feet apart.”

5. Keep it watered

As temperatures rise, keeping up with watering is the ultimate firescaping strategy.

“While we want to conserve this valuable resource, it can be helpful to use drip irrigation systems that are inexpensive to set up and that can get water where it matters most – right at the base of plant,” said Tesselaar. “This curbs fungal disease by keeping water off foliage. Also, since you’re only watering the roots, you aren’t encouraging weeds.”

“Watering is a necessary deterrent to fires,” said Skelly. “Keep plants lush. The closer you get to the house, the more vigilant you must be.”

Sprinkler systems, added Cohen, also play a major role in reducing fire risk: “A combination of drip systems and low-precipitation overhead irrigation will keep plants filled with water and less likely to burn.” On the other hand, he warned, you should monitor irrigation to prevent the drowning of any drought-tolerant plants.

“So remember – keep your landscape watered, lean, clean and green,” said Tesselaar, “but don’t be afraid to experiment with color and texture and choose plants that offer you season-long interest.”

Resources

www.livingwithfire.info

www.firesafegarden.com

www.pacifichorticulture.org

www.greenscenelandscape.com

Images

[Flickr image collection: Fire-safe & drought-tolerant plants](#)

About Tesselaar

Tesselaar Plants searches the world and introduces new plants for the home garden, landscape, home décor and gift markets. Tesselaar undertakes extensive research and development of its varieties and, once they’re selected for introduction, provides marketing and promotional support through its grower and retail network. The Tesselaar philosophy is to introduce exceptional plants while “making gardening easy” for everyone, so it makes its products as widely available as possible. Tesselaar believes the more gardeners there are, the better it is for everyone.

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