

## Features

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# Fire-conscious Landscaping

*Wendy Komancheck*



While wildfires raged in Los Angeles earlier this year, we watched the news transfixed. We felt compassion for the homeowners and businesses that lost their buildings and properties.

The Santa Ana Winds, a regular part of California's climate, gather their energy from the desert and blow into California. Dry vegetation, lack of humidity and hot winds from the desert all provide the perfect storm needed to start a wildfire—all it needs is a human-initiated spark.

**Left: The elfin forest of California, where everything grows low to the ground.**

Nan Sterman, botanist, journalist and horticulturist, grew up in Southern California and is knowledgeable about the state's unique climate and wildfires. She owns [WaterWiseGardener.com](https://www.waterwisegardener.com) and teaches courses to garden enthusiasts.

"Our climate has a different pattern than anywhere else in the country. Our climate pattern is rainfall starts in November, normally goes through the end of March and then there's no rain from March through the end of October," she said. "[This is] why people love to come here in the summer and love to come here year-round because we have these gorgeous, clear, warm, hot summer days we never worry about. You could plan an outdoor wedding without thinking about 'Is it going to rain?' or having a backup."

## California's Climate Isn't a Drought

Nan continued by saying that this dry season is typical and hasn't been labeled a drought. At our interview in early January 2025, when the wildfires were raging in the Palisades fire in California, Nan said there hadn't been a drought warning because it's usually this dry.

"So the thing is, we have this long period of no rainfall. I'm not going to call it a drought because it's normal. And so plants have to adapt to the hottest, driest time of year with no moisture from Mother Nature. Instead, we have little tiny leaves and succulent leaves and different adaptations. So plants survive that hot, dry period. We don't have those big-leaved trees except for in the riparian corridor," Nan explained.

Nan also said chaparral and coastal sage scrub are short because of the harsh climate. These scrublands are called "elfin forests" because the conditions are so harsh that plants don't have the resources to grow tall. Chaparral

and coastal sage scrub are California's native plants. However, Nan clarified the myth that these plants need fire to propagate.

"Even the ones whose seeds sprout only after a fire, they don't need fire. They've adapted so that fire stimulates the seeds to germinate," Nan said.

## There's No Such Thing as a Fireproof Plant

Nan explained that there are no fire-wise plants. While fire companies and horticulturists put out safe plant lists, no scientific data supports a fireproof plant.

Nan uses specific ice plants as an example. *Caprobrotus edulis* grows low to the ground and they're drought-tolerant, but also invasive.

Nan said, "Ice plants and many other plants grow in layers. Every year there's another layer, but it's live on the top. Underneath, it's just brown stems. And it'll burn. In fact, after one of the big fires [around] 2007, I drove around looking in the fire area to see what had burned. Ice plant, which has been sold for years and years as fire-safe, was toast."

Linda Langelo, who lives in Colorado, agreed. She said there are no fireproof plants because of the low oil or resin in the plants. Linda refers to the firescaping zone theory, which makes the home the wildfire's bull's eye.

Fire-wise landscaping divides the property into zones that spread back in concentric circles. The first 5 ft. of the firescaping zones should be empty—no grass, succulents or natives.

In the next 30 ft., plants should have high irrigation: Low, green stems and the plant's ability to be drought tolerant. With fire-wise zones, you avoid creating ladder fuels in landscape beds.

Linda explained ladder fuels. "Say you have a tree, and you think, 'I'll have a small ornamental grass and then I'll have a shrub and then I'll have the tree. What a lovely thing.'

"Well, not when there's a fire because up it goes, and by the time the grass is on fire and the shrub is on fire, the intensity of the heat will catch the tree on fire."

In the end, you don't want to fuel a wildfire. Encourage your customers to plant fewer ladder fuels, as well as dry grasses and other plants. The less lawn a homeowner has, the better because there will be less fuel to feed the wildfire.

Nan and Linda both agreed that well-watered plants are better choices. Well-irrigated plants won't survive a wildfire, but they'll sizzle out compared to fueling an inferno.

Linda and Nan reminded me that drought-tolerant and native plants are best for fire-wise landscaping. Nan said, "But hydrated doesn't necessarily mean high water. Well-hydrated means not drought-stressed. There is a delicate balance here between well-watered and over-watered. Overwatering kills plants."

Garden centers everywhere in the U.S. can discuss fire-wise landscaping with customers, from workshops to webinars, since wildfires are becoming more prevalent. **GP**

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