



Fall, Fires, and the First 5 Feet  
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UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

As wildfire rages in other parts of the state, we're reminded again of our own vulnerabilities. Fall is a great time to consider wildfire safety in your yard.

The first 5 feet next to the house has been found to be the most important area of all for improving the likelihood of your house surviving a wildfire. Much emphasis is placed on the importance of 100 feet of defensible space as required in El Dorado County and statewide. Defensible space does surely limit the energy of wildfires that might visit your community, and also provides space for firefighters to work to save your home. But in terms of your house actually igniting, the first 5 feet have been found to be the most critical.

People often start out 100 feet and then work in toward their house, which is kind of backwards in terms of bang for your buck. What you really want to do is to start at the house and work out. With fall winds, dried-out conditions, and red flag warnings, now is really not the time to be using lots of equipment anyway, to limb up trees and cut branches and shrubs in those outer zones.

This can be a great time, though, to focus on that first 5 feet. This is where embers can fly in from over a mile away; ignited vegetation in this space is the reason that most homes are actually lost in a wildfire. An ember lands on shrubs, dead leaves, or even a flammable tool like a broom next to the house, and from there starts a chain reaction that sets the house on fire.

It's good to walk around your house and note where it is especially vulnerable. Where would it be especially bad for a flying ember - or a several-inch long burning chunk of wood - to land? And where do leaves collect? That is likely right where embers will collect as well. Bark mulch can also act as dangerous kindling. Bark mulch is great for keeping weeds down and moisture in,

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but if you have bark mulch next to your house, remove it from that first 5 feet. You really want just hardscape, paths, rocks, or even dirt there. That way, embers that fall near your house will simply burn out without igniting your house.

And as you take advantage of fall to plant perennials or natives, fall being a perfect time for such efforts, be careful not to plant anything too close to your house. Above all, do not plant anything but very low-growing, well-spaced plants (if any at all) in that first 5 feet. And be careful not to plant shrubs where they will be either under trees or will touch other shrubs at maturity anywhere in the next 100 feet either. If you do, they can become a fire hazard as they grow, with the potential to act as fuel, igniting other plants in your yard, and leading fire to your home itself.

If you do have shrubs or other vegetation close to your house or too close to other plants, fall can be a great time to simply move them. In order to clear vegetation from the first 5 feet next to our own house, we were able, last fall, to successfully move a 6-foot kumquat, a 7-foot lilac, and several California roses, all of which were right next to the house. Other plants, such an oh-so-highly flammable juniper, were simply removed and discarded. That old foundation-plant strategy just doesn't make sense in our foothill homes. Plants that are directly under windows are particularly dangerous.

To help relocated plants survive, water them well, cover their root ball in damp burlap as you move them, and work to orient them in the same direction as they were originally. The new hole you dig should be about twice as wide, but the same depth, as the root ball. Water them very well in their new spots, and provide shade from the fall sunshine as each plant adjusts to its new location. You also may want to protect the plants from frost their first year as they establish themselves anew. You will also want to keep the ground moist in the winter, if rains do not materialize. Providing partial shade in the first summer, with a temporary shade structure, can also be a good idea.

So don't hang up your garden tools just yet. Focus on the 5-foot space in your yard that is next to your house, and improve the fire resilience of your precious home! Living in fire-prone areas like ours, we really don't have to be just sitting ducks – we can work to truly increase the odds of our homes surviving a wildfire.

Here are upcoming on-line classes we know will interest you:

Oaks of El Dorado County

October 17, 2020 9:00 AM - 11:00 AM

Please register in advance at

<https://ucanr.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJAofuihqTotHd0D987VJ4UXFikAU6W3iqNk>

Contact: UCCE Master Gardeners 530-621-5512

Ask a Master Gardener (a live question and answer event)

October 21, 2020 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM

Please register in advance at

<https://ucanr.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJMvc-6rrj4iHdWnhc-p9j4ZxoCUYgKnbZBh>

Contact: UCCE Master Gardeners 530-621-5512

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Putting Your Vineyard and Garden to Bed

October 31, 2020 9:00 AM - 11:00 AM

Please register in advance at

<https://ucanr.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJcsd-CppzIuHtCyPb7JiGEtot7b50RP2P8z>

Contact: UCCE Master Gardeners of Central Sierra 209-223-6838

*Currently we are in phase 2 resumption of activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future be limited. Please see our calendar of events for learning opportunities. We realize our public classes are valued by County residents and we especially appreciate your continued support and understanding during this public health challenge.*

*We do have some good news--the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public, from 9 AM to noon on Fridays and Saturdays. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open. Check [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration\\_Garden](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden) for more information.*

*Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: [mgeldorado.ucanr.edu](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu). We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.*

*Stay safe and follow recommended health and sanitation practices in the coming weeks. For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news).*