FIRESCAPING

ECO-FRIENDLY AND FIRE-RESILIENT:

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS

Over 90 percent of WUI fires in California are anthropogenic, with a spike in ignitions occurring on July 4th.

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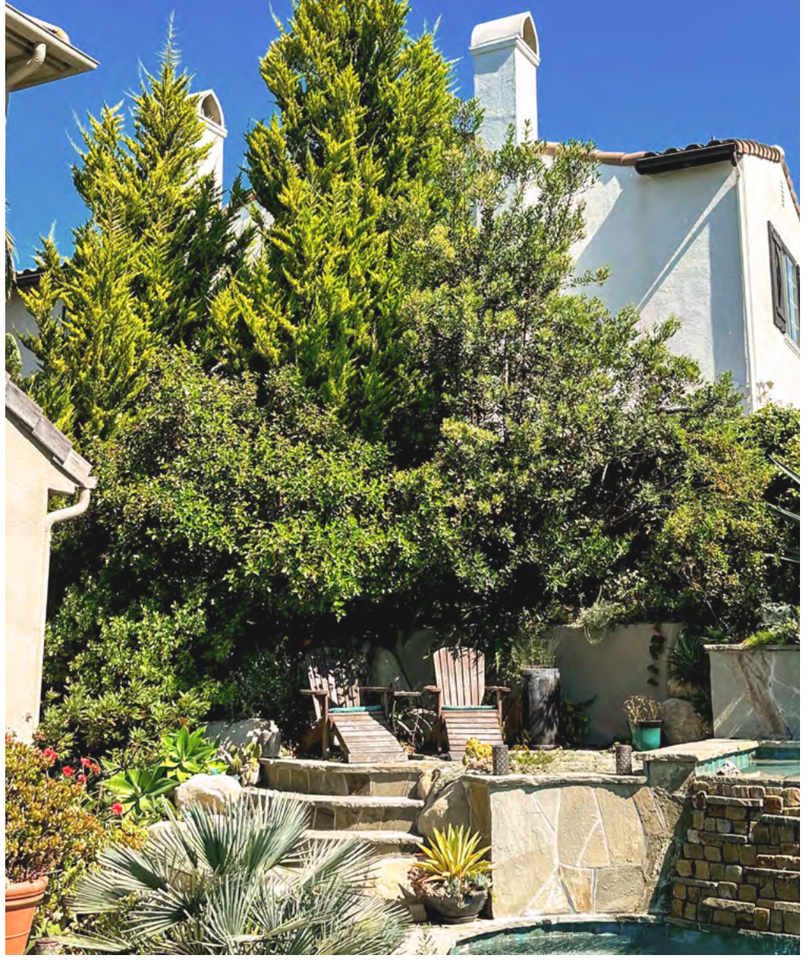
LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS PLAY A DISTINCTIVE ROLE IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY. We were among the first landscape professionals to adopt ecological design in residential communities and apply permaculture and watershed-friendly principles to ornamental landscapes. We have embraced the beauty of salvaged, recycled, and sustainable building materials and we continue to lead the native plant renaissance by designing residential gardens that restore degraded urban and suburban ecosystems. Our knowledge extends to the celebrated history and art of ornamental horticulture. Most importantly, we are fascinated by plants and delight in shaping the biotic networks that glue our world together.

Legislation aimed at preventing loss of life and property in wildland-urban interface (WUI) fire zones, designated by CalFire, challenges many established principles we have learned as professional garden designers. Foundation planting, massing, layering, fragrance, mulch, visual screening, and developing a list of tall, narrow plants for small spaces are just a few aspects of landscape design that must be reexamined, especially in light of defensible space legislation that enshrines 'Zone 0' into law for properties in very high fire severity zones. Enforcement mechanisms for existing homes impacted by this law are due in 2026.

Amendments to defensible space laws can be controversial because they can impact both long-cherished and newly designed landscapes and gardens. However, rules vary by municipality, so be sure to check with the local fire authority for the specific codes that apply to your project. Fire science applied to residential landscapes is becoming more nuanced over time, even as development pressure in WUI zones continues unabated.



Screening plantings in narrow side lots may need to be reconsidered in high fire severity zones. These existing Monterey Cypress trees may need to be pruned or removed, and adjacent 'laddering' shrubs should be trimmed or taken out to maintain a 10-foot distance from rooflines.
Photo: by Jodie Cook

Unimpeded flying embers penetrating vulnerable points in buildings are a primary cause of life-threatening WUI fires in our state. Thus, retrofitting defensible space always begins with hardening the home itself and works outward concentrically

« Think native when planting succulents near structures, Dudleya pulverulenta. Photo by Jodie Cook.

Soft underfoot, low-growing Dymondia margaretae in a permeable patio. Ideally, groundcover should be cleared and replaced with pea gravel directly adjacent to the outer walls or replaced with pea gravel in Zone 0.
Photo by Jodie Cook.

toward Zone 2, which extends to the 100 foot mark or your property line.

Contrary to sensational headlines, climate change does not directly ignite fires, neither do our long Mediterranean summers, but these factors do create conditions that increase the risk and intensity of fires, such as prolonged droughts and higher temperatures. While our native plants do not 'need' fire, they have evolved alongside it.

In populated areas of Northern and Southern California, people inadvertently ignite fires at times that differ from natural historical fire regimes to which our ecoregions are adapted. Over 90 percent of WUI fires in California are anthropogenic, with a spike in ignitions occurring on July 4th. Effective early warning technologies are being developed to detect fires closer to their ignition points, long before they threaten communities. These new technologies will rightly shift the focus to ignition points, rather than preemptively clearing native wildlands of their plants, habitats, and ecosystems.

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WE ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO CREATE GARDENS OF THE FUTURE; fire-resistant and ecologically rich while delivering our clients the functional, well-being-enhancing retreats they seek. This task requires not only an appreciation for plants and the ability to sensitively craft outdoor space, but an understanding of best practices for fire resilience and the determination to find innovative solutions to rigid design limitations. We don't want to break the rules, but it is perfectly fine to bend them toward the results we desire. Just as our greatest creative spark sometimes arises from the tightest budget, we can use these new restrictions to drive the creativity for which California designers are admired.

Rules related to defensible space zones have been extensively covered so I won't reiterate them here. Instead, I will offer ideas for creatively interpreting these spaces, hoping you will build on them to create something truly wonderful. Zone 0 (0-5 feet) and Zone 1 (to 30 feet) are perfect opportunities to include native plants in the residential landscape. In a lightly irrigated garden context, many native plants (even muskily fragrant plants like native salvias) can be colorful, wildlife-enhancing additions to our immediate environment. One challenge for designers lies in the area most restricted by defensible space guidelines: Zone 0.

Although Zone 0 is defined as a plant-free five-foot boundary around the home's perimeter, this boundary need not be a boring rectangle! It can have a sinuous, meandering, or geometric edge extending into the garden. These extensions could feature a potager using metal troughs, Corten steel, or other non-combustible, food-safe materials on a bed of crunchy pea gravel. It might feature a rain chain and naturalistic

« A 10-foot wide patio with an undulating edge abuts the house, and beyond it is an assortment of low, irrigated native plants (Achillea millefolium 'Cerise Queen,' Epilobium sp., Satureja chandleri, Leymus condensatus 'Canyon Prince'). Masonry or stucco walls can act as fire breaks. Photo by Jodie Cook.

bioswale moving water gently away from the perimeter of the home, or it might include a recirculating water feature, or raked gravel sculpture garden. Zone 0 offers designers a silver lining by pushing patio seating away from its traditional location against the house and out into the garden, where nature can be intimately enjoyed.

Assembly Bill 3074, coupled with AB 38, gives the state a mechanism for enforcing defensible space laws, including Zone 0. In Zone 0, the ground plane cannot be covered with combustible materials like wood mulch, artificial turf, or wood edging adjoining the house.

Low, irrigated groundcover may be allowed in less severe fire hazard zones. Permeable paving can be artistically detailed or incorporate low groundcover plants, such as Kurapia or *Dymondia margaretae* (pg. 32) in the gaps. This area can also feature succulent ceramic container arrangements, boulder water features, or metal or ceramic statuary. While wood, upholstered, or plastic composite furniture is not allowed, it can include artistic iron garden benches or die-cut sheet metal screening.

Be cautious about filling the 0–30 foot zone with spiny cacti for water conservation and fire-resistance. Defensible space must provide a safe staging area for firefighters, and spiky cacti do not accommodate this need. Additionally, wood or non-fire-resistant composite or plastic furniture should not be placed in Zone 0.

By embracing these challenges with creativity and expertise, we can design landscapes that are not only beautiful and functional but also resilient and safe for our communities.

Jodie is passionate about a number of topics on sustainability and the future of Landscape Design & Architecture. To get in touch or find out more, visit her website:
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« Sphaeralcea 'Childerley' is a low-growing desert mallow. Photo by Jodie Cook.

Below: Malva 'Purissima' lends a tropical feel to California gardens. Photo by Jodie Cook.

Below: Strategically placed boulders, low fire-resistant plants, and non-combustible surfacing in Zone 0. This zone is best considered as a 'no plant' zone, however spaced and irrigated low-risk plants may be acceptable.

Bottom Right: Sea glass, birds-eye gravel and leftover pool tile sparkle in a Zone 0 hardscape detail. Photo by Jodie Cook.