

“The firestorm descended like a dragon from hell on the foothill neighborhoods and laid them to waste.” “The wildfire swept through the community with a tsunami of flame.” “The wildfire literally exploded houses in flames leaving destruction in its path.” These three quotes represent common misconceptions about the behavior of wildfire. In fact, the typical pattern of destruction from wildfire is total home destruction with surrounding vegetation unconsumed. Jack Cohen, PhD research physical scientist retired from the National Forest Service and considered by many to be the godfather of wildfire science, believes research shows that our homes are actually being destroyed during wildfires due to a home ignition problem. You can hear Jack and others discuss this issue by watching the FIRESafe MARIN youtube video titled “Zone Zero: Ground Zero When Protecting Your Home.”

Embers are the most common cause of home ignition. They are light enough to be blown through the air and can result in the rapid spread of wildfire by spotting (in which embers are blown ahead of the main fire, starting other fires). Should these embers land on or near your house, they could just as easily ignite nearby vegetation, accumulated debris, or enter the home (through openings or vents). Recent research indicates that two out of every three homes destroyed during wildfires were ignited either directly or indirectly by wind-dispersed, wildfire-generated, burning, or glowing embers and not from the actual flames of the fire.

Defensible space is essential to improve your home’s chance of surviving a wildfire. It’s the buffer you create between a building on your property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surround it. Defensible space will help slow or stop the spread of wildfire and protect your home from catching fire – either from direct flame contact or radiant heat. Defensible space is also important to help protect firefighters when they are defending your home. Creating defensible space does not mean you need a ring of bare dirt around your home. Through proper planning, you can have both a beautiful landscape and a fire safe home. For detailed information about what actions need to be taken in each of the four zones, please go to the firesafemarin.org website and select “Create a Fire-Smart Yard.” There is also an excellent Fire Smart Landscaping video from UC Marin Master Gardeners available on the FIRESafe MARIN youtube channel.

The Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District helps our homeowners to create defensible space through the defensible space inspection program, curbside chipper service, hazardous plant removal grants, goat grazing, and fuel reduction projects. Please sign up for chipper service at chipperday.com/marin. New guidelines to apply for this year's hazardous plant removal grants will be coming out soon. You have all probably seen the goats at work. Large fuel reduction projects are either in process or completed at San Domenico and Triple C Ranch.

A coupled approach, using good defensible space and a fire hardened home is necessary to provide the greatest level of protection. Preparing and maintaining adequate defensible space will guard against flame contact and radiant exposures from nearby vegetation. When it comes to protecting your home against embers, fire-resistant building material and design considerations cannot be ignored. Similarly, if you don’t have defensible space - or don’t maintain it – the wildfire will produce maximum ember, flame, and radiant exposures to your home. It is very unlikely that even hardened buildings can survive such exposure, as a weak link will likely exist somewhere in the building enclosure.

The FIRESafe MARIN website has a detailed guide prepared by the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety that describes how to harden your home called “Protect Your Property From Wildfire.” Here are some of the most important actions you can take to harden your home. Make sure that your roof is rated Class A and is kept free of leaves and other flammable debris. Keep your gutters clean and screened. Regularly inspect for debris accumulation on and around skylights. If you have

vented openings to your attic or crawl space, make sure these vents are covered with 1/8-inch corrosion resistant metal mesh. Windows and glass doors should be constructed of dual-pane tempered glass. Remove all combustible materials under decks and consider use of fine mesh screening to keep out embers. If you have combustible siding, make sure that you maintain ground-to-siding clearance of six inches and create a non-combustible zone around the first five feet of the home. New fences should be constructed of ignition resistant materials and attachments to homes (usually gates) should be non combustible.

The Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District (SHFPD) recently purchased 30 satellite telephones that can be used during power outages to contact 911. A list of addresses where the phones can be accessed will be posted on the the SHFPD website and the Sleepy Hollow Homes Association website. Your local block captains will be reaching out to you with more information about the program. The infrastructure for additional emergency communications systems has been installed at the new community center and should be fully operational by July. Later this summer we will be conducting a simple evacuation drill designed to remind each family to be prepared by signing up for alerts and warnings, preparing a Go Bag, making an evacuation plan and going over your evacuation checklist. Post covid, your local block captains will also be reaching out to engage residents with wildfire safety preparation information.