FREE Fire-Wise Landscape Workshop

Hot, dry weather is not only challenging in terms of water supply, but also in the midst of one of the most active fire seasons on record.

Together, the City of San Marcos, Vallecitos Water District and Olivenhain Municipal Water District are hosting a FREE Fire-Wise Landscape Workshop on Wednesday, August 27 at 6:00 PM City of San Marcos Community Services Department 3 Civic Center Drive, San Marcos

Workshop attendees will learn about protecting their homes from fires while reducing water used for irrigation by installing fire-wise, water-efficient landscapes.

The free workshop will be taught by local California native plant expert, Greg Rohlf, who will cover the basic principles of landscape zoning and hydridation, with an overview of plant installation, installation, irrigation, and maintenance.

The San Marcos Fire Department will also be on hand to share helpful fire protection and recovery tips. Water district representatives will give information on the drought and water conservation programs, while the City of San Marcos will discuss ways to mitigate runoff caused by fire damage. There is no need to register or reserve a seat, please visit www.olivenhainwater.com/events.

Mandatory Water-Use Restrictions in Effect

On July 15, the State Water Resources Control Board adopted emergency statewide regulations to require all California water agencies to manage mandatory water-use restrictions.

On July 24, Vallecitos’ wholesale, the San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA), authorized its Level 2 “Drought Alert” condition calling for mandatory water conservation measures in order to keep as much water as possible in storage for 2015 and comply with the state mandates.

In support, on August 4, 2014, the Vallecitos Board of Directors voted to increase to a Level 2 Drought Alert requiring mandatory water-use restrictions.

To learn more about what you can do and what local water agencies are doing to enhance water supply reliability, please visit www.moridrought.org.

Vallecitos’ proactive approach kept water flowing during Cocos fires

Long before the spine of the fire’s first embers took shape and the fierce firestorms and first responders worked the front lines to protect the community from the devastating fires in May, the Vallecitos Water District was working behind the scenes to ensure water availability.

During this type of emergency, keeping fire fighting 24/7 to extinguish fires and maintain fire hydrants at various elevations within the District’s service area is a challenge. But even prior to that, Vallecitos took actions based on weather patterns and land-driven planning that helped prevent the fire damage from being worse.

Vallecitos’ preparation procedures actually started when the San Diego event was forecasted. The District – which receives 100 percent imported water – made sure enough water was available if a fire broke out by filling all of its tanks and reservoirs to maximum capacity and altering its delivery system for increased water flow.

This preparedness came in handy when the fire threatened operation of the District’s Meadowlark Water Reclamation Facility and South Lake Pump Station, which supplies water to the Corrida Hills area. Electricity was affected at both facilities, however due to the Board’s foresight to approve the installation of backup power supply systems at both locations, water was continually available to firefighters and a fully functional reclamation facility prevented sewer spills.

During the fires, Vallecitos implemented its Emergency Operations Center (EOC), in rotating 24-hour shifts, the EOC, led by a Vallecitos Incident Manager, coordinated with staff at various posts to handle everything from water availability and public information to coordinating with other agencies to address related needs as required.

District staff also continued their water-monitoring diligence, so water quality continued to meet or exceed all existing water standards regardless of the supply system being under duress for three days of above average demand. During this time, the District pumped more than 1,000 gallons a minute to the Corrida Hills area to provide water to the firefighters battling the Cocos fire.

When you combine a progressive Board and management team, with an agency well prepared for emergencies, you have the Vallecitos Water District - water and wastewater specialists dedicated to doing all that is needed to maintain service reliability to protect the community we call home.
Q & A with local native plant author, Greg Rubin about fire-resistant native plants

Q: Are California landscapes firesafe?

A: For the most part, yes. “Firesafe” is a more appropriate term. Part of the firesafe landscape equation is adequate hydration and maintenance. Any plant that has a significant proportion of dead material is a fire hazard. Hydrated plants usually don’t burn as high and as hot. One of the key advantages of native landscapes is that much less water is required to achieve this type of “firesafe” condition. If it is important to remember not to scope out the fire-prone plants. All that you will achieve is severe erosion, replacement by non-native fast-flowering weeds, destruction of habitat, and an absurd sense of satisfaction to have to restore the areas you just cleaned. There are no guarantees your house won’t burn in a firestorm, especially if simple firesafe architectural modifications have not been made.

Q: What type of mulch should be used to stabilize slopes and is it fire-resistant?

A: Because it is closely emulates the natural duff layer that forms around most plant communities, shredded wood bark has been the “go-to” product for natives. It has tremendous moisture retention, erosion resistance, longevity, favorable fire-chemistry, and most customers I talk to like it. It is quite beautiful. The key property of this mulch is that it is fibrous, tends to consolidate and knit together with repeated watering. It is well decomposed, and not likely to achieve fire resistance. Extra watering cycles on the new landscape are good for achieving this. That way the mulch is a poorly oxygenated fuel (ever steel wool will burn fiercely because it is so well aerated). The shredded wood bark mulch can still burn, but in a consolidates situation the flame height is a matter of inches rather than feet, and burning/moldering burns can simply be reeked towards the base in order to cut the progress. Finally, we don’t recommend putting bark mulches under eaves. It is much better to put a three to four feet wide, decomposed granite, or concrete apron directly around the house (or nothing at all).

Q: Do you have to keep watering a native landscape after it is established?

A: To ensure proper levels of hydration, light overhead irrigation during the warm months only is recommended. The irrigation cycles are on the order of a summer thunderstorm or dry. Vegetative fires-resistance is built up over time - it is like growing our own counter-productive to pour water on your designated landscape as the fire approaches.

Q: How do you irrigate native landscapes, especially on slopes?

A: Drip systems, over time, tend to kill a large proportion of drought tolerant native plants. Over 20 years and 70% landscapes we have come to realize that the best way to fire-resistant plants is just like Mother Nature does, with rainfall. The closest thing to achieving “rainfall” is a dry efficient sprinkler system. One example are single stream nozzles (such as Hunter’s RS7000, Rotor Nozzle, or Hunter’s RS9000), like Hunter HR-Rotators. These are only examples as there are many others as well. Overhead irrigation works to flatten out the leaves and stems, thus increasing its effectiveness. Through these leaves, and moisture stored in the mulch is also accessible by the landscape as needed, it appears that drip systems create localized hyper-saturation at the base of the plant which negatively impacts the native, drought tolerant soil ecology. The moist sub-soil acts to hydrate the root system as needed, thus increasing the landscape’s overall fire resistance.

*Mulch is available for rotation rules. For more information, go to www.wgc.org/relates.

Q: Are succulents the best fire-resistant slope groundcovers?

A: For many years, most homeowners have covered their slopes in some form of succulent (like hohenstei-nig. Dumbbeard, or Red Agave), assuming these to be the best erosion control and the best firebreaks. In fact, they are pretty inferior in both categories. These succulent groundcovers tend to be heavy and lack the extensive soil ecology that stabilizes natural soil structure. Many succulents hang on to their moisture under extreme heat stress, succulents readily give up their, only to have the remaining material go up in flames. Native plants are supported by a vast and intricate soil ecology that stores moisture and stabilizes soil. Recent RNC news story illustrates the point. The report states that a house that burned, the evidence on the house is fire-washed and Channel 4, was illustrating the dangers of planting with it. What was fueling the flames right now to hint? Burning vegetation. Want to learn more about fire-resistant native plants from Greg Rubin? Attend the FREE firewise landscape workshop on August 27th.