

FIRESafe MARIN produced a very interesting webinar last month that we encourage all of you to watch. A recording of the webinar is available on the FIRESafe MARIN youtube channel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELu_mPm2NTQ&t=1182s) along with recordings of prior webinars and over 75 wildfire safety related videos. The webinar described inexpensive ways for homeowners to reduce the vulnerability of their home within the first five feet of the structure, the so called Zone 0. It begins with a discussion of what fire professionals call the “Home Ignition Problem.”

We start with the premise that wildfires are inevitable, thus extreme wildfires are inevitable; but that does not mean that Wildland-Urban fire disasters are inevitable. For many of us the perception of how homes ignite during wildfires is that fire sweeps through the community like a “tsunami” of fire literally exploding houses in flames and leaving destruction in its path. In reality, the typical pattern of destruction is that homes are destroyed but much of the surrounding green vegetation is not consumed. Walls of flame do not sweep through communities destroying everything in their path.

Typically home ignitions result from lofted burning embers and/or low intensity surface fire spreading to contact the structure. Tree canopies typically remain unburned indicating that wildfire flames did not spread through the community and burning trees did not ignite homes. In heavily forested wild lands extreme wildfire behavior does produce canopy fires where trees are completely consumed. In residential areas like Sleepy Hollow the vegetation or local conditions around homes are not sufficient to maintain ignition of intense canopy fires. A roadway can create enough of a fuel break to stop a crown fire but not ember ignition. There are many post fire photos in the presentation that show heavily forested areas where trees are destroyed but across a fuel break large trees are unburned. However, it is common to see homes completely destroyed by embers and surface fires while the tree canopy is untouched. The answer is to make homes ignition resistant during extreme wildfire.

One of the first things we all should do is to prevent burning within 5 feet of flammable building materials. That means creating a non-ignition zone within 5 feet of a home and its flammable attachments. Here are some simple, practical options to protect your home from wildfire embers.

1. Make sure there is a vertical separation of at least 6 inches between the ground and combustible siding.
2. Use only noncombustible mulches such as gravel, decomposed granite, or compost. Avoid bark, especially “Gorilla Hair.”
3. Install noncombustible fences and gates. This is particularly important in areas where they make contact with the home.
4. Decks and porches should be screened to prevent ember entry and there should be no combustible materials stored under decks.
5. Remove leaf litter frequently within the first five feet. Don't just move it to another location, strong winds during fires will blow it back against the home.
6. Move combustible outdoor items indoors or 30 feet from structures. This includes patio furniture cushions, wicker furniture, toys, natural fiber doormats, plastic trash cans, firewood and lumber.
7. Make fire smart landscaping choices. The next two FIRESafe MARIN webinars will discuss this in greater detail.