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# Understanding fire sparks smart choices

A record-breaking fire season is entirely possible this year, according to many local experts. Already several blazes in the bosques near Albuquerque have threatened large sections of urban sprawl. In May an inferno near Ruidoso forced some families to evacuate their homes.

In a land where fire is a given, the burning question for property owners should be: how can I protect myself, my family and my investment?

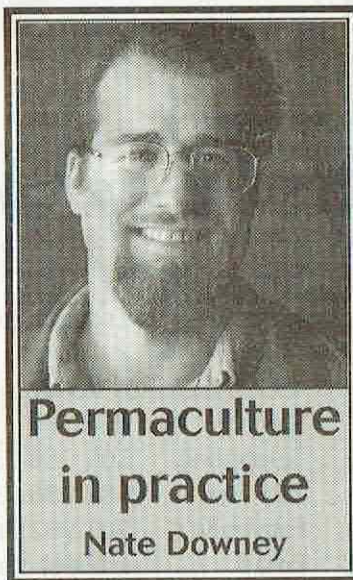
The best way to prevent damage to property is to not build in fire's probable path. Heat rises, so ridgetops are risky. Trees with high sap content burn more furiously than other types of vegetation, so dense conifer stands can be dangerous. Slopes that face the southwest are more fire-prone than those that face north and east.

Most people looking for homes and land find it difficult to make fire damage prevention a high priority. More immediate enticements such as "panoramic views" and "a wooded

retreat" usually prevail during the purchasing process. Once you have your home, there are several techniques that can minimize forest-fire damage.

Ben Haggard, a permaculture consultant with Regenesys, a locally based ecological design and development company, has had first-hand experience with designing a successful fire prevention strategy. In the early 1990s Haggard was part of a team that began to reduce fire danger around the main buildings at the Lama Foundation in Lama, N.M. One day during the summer of 1996 his strategy was put to the test during the Hondo Fire.

The strategy prevailed because of three strategies: re-routing the road along Lama's fire sector such that it became a double fire break; creating moist microclimates in on-contour swales; and concentrating irrigated plantings around buildings. As Haggard predicted, buildings situated outside the focus of the design were almost entirely



destroyed, but buildings being protected by the implemented design survived the catastrophe completely unscathed.

Now, even though the forest will take decades to recover to the point that such a disaster could happen again, new construction at Lama is always sited properly. More fire-retardant features are being situated in the fire sector. And runoff water from

roofs is consistently put to use with the threat of fire in mind.

Although Haggard insists that site selection is the key to fire-damage prevention, he does encourage architects, builders and homeowners to become more fire conscious by using fire retardant materials and reducing overhangs, decks and balconies.

After the Dome Fire of 1996, the Los Alamos Cooperative Extension Service came out with some helpful hints for homeowners ranging from planting vegetable gardens in the low-fuel zone to installing a permanent roof sprinkler with a readily accessible valve. One of the most obvious tips provided - Stack firewood away from the house - is unfortunately one of the least convenient.

Hopefully, this fire season will come and go with little property damage and no loss of life. But, as Haggard says, "We live in a fire-determined landscape. It requires fire for its

health, because, if fires don't come through periodically, all of the pent-up potential eventually spells catastrophe.

"The challenge is to integrate aspects of the landscape design that would be part of the design anyway, with a strategy that anticipates fire. It's about balancing our quality of life with the need to protect our lives and our investments."

Although we must always respect its complexity, unpredictability and awesome power, we can begin to understand the dynamics and patterns of fire. The next step is to apply our understanding to the land that we steward.

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