

by *Clare Bell, The Garden Centre, Kirstenbosch*

## 'FIRESCAPING' YOUR GARDEN

All the serious fires we've had this summer in the Western Cape have alerted gardeners to the need to avoid plants which burn easily and to 'firescape' their gardens. Here are some points to consider in your planning.

### • Assess the vulnerability of your property

Is it close to alien forest or thickets of vegetation? Is it subject to strong south-easterly winds?

Is it at the top of a slope? Fire naturally moves up a slope, drying everything out ahead of it, and thus burns more vigorously higher up than lower down.

### • Proper alien clearing needs to be done outside your property

Cut down or poison aliens and remove them from the site to avoid piles of dead material lying around.

### • There is no such thing as a fire resistant plant

All plants will eventually burn if a fire is hot enough so all you can do is place plants according to how long each kind is able to resist burning.

### • Re-vegetating an area devastated by fire

Pioneer plants that will grow quickly are *Agapanthus*, *Psoralea pinnata*, *Euryops*, *Athanasia dentata*, *Gazania*, *Felicia*, vygies and *Virgilia oroboides* (but beware, as this tree can become rather invasive, especially in the Betty's Bay area).

Plan your garden with a fire resistant buffer zone on the periphery, a medium resistant ring within that and an approximately 3 m wide zone of low resistant planting around the house.

### The buffer zone

This area should be the furthest away from the house on the periphery of the property. Plant low growing **groundcovers** with fleshy leaves which have a high resistance to fire like vygies, (*Lampranthus*, *Malephora*, *Drosanthemum*, *Delosperma* and *Carpobrotus*), *Gazania*, *Arctotis*, *Cliffortia ferruginea* and *Aloe brevifolia*. These need to be watered at least once a week to retain their high fire-resistant quality.

**Bulbs** could include *Tulbaghia violacea*, *Agapanthus* and *Watsonia*. If a **hedge** is needed, use plants that re-sprout and do not have large quantities of dead material accumulating in the plant such as proteas. Good hedge plants include *Rhus crenata*, *R. glauca* and *R. lucida*, all of which will re-sprout if burnt, as will *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*. *Chrysanthemoides monilifera* will burn more slowly because of its succulent-like leaves.

### Medium resistance zone

This should be the area between the peripheral buffer zone and the inner band around the house. It is possible to plant a fynbos garden here, but remember to mix **tall and short**

**shrubs** to prevent a large dense thicket developing that could support a very hot fire. To prevent mud slides after a fire and to ensure a speedy recovery, it is important to plant **sprouters** here. These plants have an underground ligno-tuber or rootstock that re-sprouts if burnt to the ground and could include *Mimetes cucullatus*, *Leucadendron salignum*, *Chondropetalum tectorum*, *Penaea mucronata*, *Erica cerinthoides*, *E. diaphana*, *E. glandulosa*, *E. mammosa*, *Maytenus oleoides*, *Brachylaena discolor*, *Salvia chame-laeagnea*, *S. lanceolata*, *Pelargonium cucullatum*, *P. betulinum*, *Felicia echinata*, *Brabejum stellatifolium*, *Protea cynaroides*, *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*, *Kiggelaria africana*, *Rhus lucida* and *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*.

Some plants also have **corky bark**, which will protect them if a fire is mild. These will start budding soon after a fire. They include *Leucospermum conocarpodendron*, *Protea nitida*, *Mimetes cucullatus* and *Aloe plicatilis*.

**Bulbs** will re-sprout quickly after a fire and will ensure that the soil is held together, preventing mud slides. These would include *Agapanthus*, *Watsonia*, *Haemanthus coccineus*, *Cyrtanthus ventricosus* and *Kniphofia*.

If you intersperse some **re-seeding plants** amongst your fynbos plants, even in the event of a fire they will ensure that the moon landscape will soon come to life. These include the many different species of *Protea*, *Erica*, *Ursinia*, *Leucadendron*, *Phylica*, *Helichrysum*, *Metalasia*, *Roella*, *Selago*, *Agathosma* as well as *Pelargonium cordifolium* and *Felicia aethiopica*.

### The low resistance zone around the house

This area must be kept free of large shrubs. It should contain low growing plants and groundcovers, interspersed with gravel or lawn. No climbers or trellises should be attached to the walls of the house in a high-risk fire area as these act as 'ladders' for the fire. **Groundcovers** for sunny areas include *Cliffortia ferruginea*, *Otholobium decumbens*, *Dymondia margaretae*, *gazanias*, *Helichrysum argyrophyllum*, *Hermannia saccifera*, *Cotula lineariloba*, *Agathosma ovata* 'Kluitjies kraal' and vygies. For shady areas, you should grow *Plectranthus verticillatus*, *P. neochilus* (which can also grow in the sun), and *P. ciliatus* 'Drege'. **Small shrubs** can be planted alone with groundcovers round them. These could include *Agathosma serpyllacea*, *Phylica ericoides*, *Felicia*, *Carissa macrocarpa*, *Cotyledon orbiculata*, *Scabiosa* and *Athanasia dentata*.

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## RESTIOS FOR A WATERWISE GARDEN

I am sending this photograph of restios as an example of mulching as a feature for a waterwise garden. I am sure that water rationing will soon become part of everyone's life as Cape Town is expanding at a phenomenal rate. We cannot and should not throw drinking water all over lawns and gardens. I have buffalo lawn, but even it needs water. I therefore chose to plant restios that are 'tolerant of dry conditions' I bought them from Kirstenbosch and planted them in May 1998. Some are in flower already, and I have only lost one small plant. They get irrigated for 20 minutes twice a week, as one needs to water indigenous plants in the beginning.

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