Australian Native Plants for Fire Resistance and Garden Design

Jo O’Connell, 2018
I founded Australian Native Plants Nursery in the early 1990s.

The Growing Grounds/Nursery is in Casitas Springs, between Ojai Ventura in Ventura County.

My background is in Zoo horticulture, habitat design, re-vegetation projects, and the cut flower industry.

My 35 years’ experience is in plants from dry & subtropical, arid and Mediterranean areas of Australia.

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We are Open by Appointment
The Thomas Fire 2017

- The Thomas Fire is the second largest wildfire in modern California history.
- It began on December 4, north of Santa Paula and within hours raged through the city of Ventura.
- It burned approximately 281,893 acres and was only contained at the end of January 2018.
- My house was burned on December 5, along with several structures that were part of the nursery.
- In parts, Thomas was a firestorm, powerful enough to create its own weather.
- It left the local terrain so completely blackened that fire experts described it as “moonscaped.”
What I Learned from the Fire:

- Fire retardant plants absorb more heat of an approaching fire without burning.
- Fire retardant trees can trap embers and sparks and reduce wind speed near a house.
- Fire retardant groundcovers can slow the travel of a fire through their leaves.
- Smooth barked trees will not burn as readily as stringy or rough barked trees.
- Plants with high moisture or salt content and/or low oil content will take more to ignite.
- Plants with high moisture or salt content and/or low oil content will burn more slowly.
Maintenance Makes a Difference:

• Remove lower branches from trees.
• Don’t allow branches to connect to the roof or part of any structures.
• Remove dry or dead material from around plants before fire season.
• Prune shrubs to keep foliage fresh and green.
• Keep plants around house and structures well irrigated.
Good Design Makes a Difference:

- A well watered hedge on the fire prone side of the house can:
  a) reduce radiant heat  b) prevent spread of fire to the house
- Replace lawns with inorganic mulches to help to slow the spread of fire, e.g. DG or gravel.
- Swales help to trap moisture.
- Plant fire retardant trees around structures as a shield.
- Test the fire resistance of plants by throwing a few leaves into a BBQ to see how they burn!
Features of Fire Retardant Plants:

• Broad and/or fleshy leaves
• High moisture content in leaves
• Smooth bark
• Low oil content: look through a leaf at the sun to sometimes see oil glands
Acacias that survived the Thomas Fire at my house:

- Acacia longifolia
- Acacia cyclops
- Acacia elata
- Acacia fimbriata
- Acacia floribunda
- Acacia viscidula
Hakeas that survived the Thomas Fire:

- Hakea salicifolia
- Hakea archaeoides
- Hakea trineura
- Hakea denticulosa
Other plants that survived the Thomas Fire at my house:

- Banksia integrifolia
- Brachychiton acerifolius
- Cassia brewsteri
- Cupaniopsis anarcardioides
More Plants that survived:

• Leptospermum petersonii
• Melaleuca armillaris
• Stenocarpus sinuatus
• Tristaniopsis laurina
Plants that Recovered:

- Gossypium sturtianum
- Calothamnus homalophyllus
- Eremophila decipiens
- Lepidozamia peroffskyana
- Lomandra longifolia
- Melaleuca hypericifolia
Going Forward:

- I will redesign my own house and garden in the following ways:
  - a) Plant Drought Hardy Rainforest  b) DG and open space around the house

- I will design clients gardens with the following in mind:
  - a) Plant mostly low shrubs near house  b) Plant screens 20+ feet from house if possible

- I will be growing more of the following plants for clients in fire prone areas:
  - a) Lomandras  b) Grevilleas  c) Hakeas  d) Tristaniopsis  e) Pittosporum  f) Banksias
Thank You!

• We have Australian Native Plants for sale here!

• Our address is Nye Road, Casitas Springs, Ventura, 93022

• We are open by appointment.

• We do mail order!

• Website: www.australianplants.com

• Email: jo@australianplants.com

• Landline: 805-649-3362