

Formerly revered trees get bad rap after wildfires

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Eucalyptuses are nothing more than multistory matchsticks ready to burst into flames when Santa Ana winds strike.

The neighbor's pine? Pretty. Pretty dangerous, that is. And that sycamore sucks up a zillion gallons of costly water.

In fire-and drought-ravaged San Diego County, such half-truths and myths have put formerly revered trees in a new light.

Yanking out any healthy tree, once seen as almost sinful, now is being viewed by some as prudent.

Chuck Eckels cut down six Australia-native Brisbane box trees on his half-acre Escondido lot about a month after the Witch Creek fire roared past.

"I look at trees as detrimental to the property as opposed to beneficial," Eckels said.

His attitude is not an aberration. A "less vegetation, the better" approach, Cal Fire urban forester Lynnette Short said, has led many people to needlessly chop down healthy trees.

"People are taking drastic measures," Short said. "There are a lot of misconceptions out there."

Local foresters and arborists want trees to stand tall again. They met last week to begin crafting policies that communities can use to save trees while protecting property. They say most well-tended trees pose little fire risk and can even prevent houses from igniting in some instances.

Pete Scully, a division chief for Cal Fire, said healthy trees have gotten a bad rap.

"Live trees, properly maintained and spaced adequately, are fine," he said.

Arborists say the threat from pines and eucalyptuses in particular has been exaggerated. They say healthy trees aren't the guzzlers people think they are, so tearing them out to conserve water is often unwarranted.

"We want the public to realize that trees are not the problem but part of the solution," said Mike Palat, an arborist and chairman of the San Diego Urban Forest Council, which includes arborists, government agencies, landscapers and nonprofit organizations.

Good and bad

Fire-conscious arborists say the Mexican fan palm is one tree they won't defend. Drew Potocki, urban forester for the city of San Diego, said the palm's fibrous material ignites easily, and strong winds often turn burning bark chunks into "flaming, flying Frisbees."

But pines and eucalyptuses – if solitary, properly spaced and 30 feet from a home – are equipped to survive most blazes, Short said.

"One of the major misconceptions I get, even from fire departments, is that eucalyptus are time bombs ready to go off in the next fire," Short said. "That's really wrong. I have eucalyptus on my property, and I would never think of cutting them down."

Arborists say no matter the variety, keeping the ground around trees free of litter is key in fire prevention. Yet many people erroneously conclude that any tree's presence greatly raises the risk.

That's how Eckels viewed it. He said some of his 15-foot trees, which all were more than 20 feet from his home, had singed leaves and blackened trunks, though the fire was hundreds of yards away. That was all the evidence he needed. He said he saw plenty of green trees going up in flames on television, and he wanted to eliminate that possibility on his property.

"I actually liked the trees," Eckels said. "They provide shade, and they made the property look nice. But I don't want tiki torches next to my house."

Eckels' fears are largely unfounded, said Anne Fege, co-founder of San Diego Partners for Biodiversity and the San Diego Fire Recovery Network.

"Fires don't ignite a house because your trees have a few scorched leaves," said Fege, also a member of the San Diego Urban Forest Council.

Cal Fire's "100 feet of defensible space around the home" mantra has been taken to extremes, said Short, a former firefighter. The standard doesn't mean remove all vegetation within 100 feet, yet that's what many people are doing, she said.

Cal Fire says healthy, pruned trees 30 feet or more from a home, including pines, can safely remain if owners have created "horizontal and vertical spacing between plants" within 100 feet of the home.

Many houses that burned in 2003 and last year ignited when wind-driven embers from a mile or more away landed on a flammable part of a home. Shade trees lining a property will catch flying embers before they can hit a home, Potocki said. "The trees could be doing you more good than harm."

Some people have made matters worse since the fires by scraping their property clean down to the dirt, said Rick Halsey, a biologist, wildland firefighter and director of the California Chaparral Institute in Escondido. He said that's what a man down his street did.

"What these people end up doing is creating a bowling alley for embers to blow right through to the house," he said.

Benefits to consider

Water issues are also a growing concern. Some trees could suffer – again because of misinformation, Palat said. He has seen people cutting back on tree irrigation, and if the drought continues, he fears people might jump to conclusions and remove trees unnecessarily.

Most established trees need less irrigation than common landscape plants and turf grasses, Palat said, because trees find their own groundwater. Shade trees also keep nearby vegetation cooler, Potocki said, and that reduces irrigation needs.

Despite fire and drought concerns, trees are more important today than ever, said Robin Rivet, associate manager of the Cool Communities Shade Tree program, which provides free trees to property owners as a means to help lower energy costs. Trees not only create shade to cool homes, they increase property values, help fight global warming, attract wildlife, reduce erosion and water pollution, and according to studies, even lower crime rates, she said.

"Most people have no idea of the value of a mature tree," Rivet said.