

- FIRE -



Good Servant; Poor Master.

by

Colleen Henry-Hall and John Smart

It's going to be a long, hot, dry summer.

Low rainfall last winter means Western Australians are faced with water restrictions and the increased threat of bushfires this summer.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management declared the fire season open in October: more than a month earlier than usual. CALM carried out its spring controlled burning program early, too, before conditions worsened. CALM district staff, local fire brigades, the Bush Fires Board and

shire councils have readied themselves for what could strain the State's firefighting resources to the breaking point.

Residents of small, country towns and on the outskirts of the metropolitan area, where the bush meets the city, will be most affected. Anywhere houses are surrounded by bush there is an increased risk that fire can take hold in the trees and scrub and spread to houses and property. It's a situation that requires extra diligence on the part of homeowners.

Fighting fire is a bit like fighting disease - the most effective treatment is prevention. There are a number of things you can do to help ensure a bushfire doesn't take your life or your house this summer.

There is a seeming conflict in the reason most people live in, say, the Hills, and in guarding against bushfire. Most have moved there so they can have a bit of bush to call their own. They want to live in the midst of nature, native trees and bushes growing almost to the door, and the cool, deep shadows of over-



Courtesy B.F.B.



Courtesy B.F.B.

Fire trap (above).

Avoid this fate (left).



hanging branches imparting a sense of seclusion, a sanctuary from the outside world.

These same trees and bushes, though, could be responsible for houses going up in smoke if a bushfire went through the area. A compromise needs to be struck, between too many trees and bushes, which is a serious fire hazard, and too few trees and bushes, which is an eyesore, but definitely cuts down the risk of fire. It's too late to consider for this year's fire season, but in the future, use landscaping techniques and specific plantings to guard against fire.

For example, smooth-barked trees are less easily ignited by burning grass and have few crevices where burning embers could lodge. Don't plant trees that shed bark in long streamers, and prune all lower branches as the trees grow. Trees should be planted away from the house so that when they're fully mature, they don't overhang the eaves, dropping leaves into the gutters.

It's summer, so what can you do now to help cut down the risk of fire? Fire needs fuel. If you remove this fuel, chances are fire won't come knocking on your door. Clear away leaves, twigs and dead plants from the gutters and the garden particularly near the house and sheds. Keep the lawn well-watered and cut short, move the winter's woodpile, store timber and kerosene and anything else that is inflammable away from the house, not under it.

Research has shown that most houses destroyed in bushfires have caught fire on the inside from embers and sparks blown in openings. Your eaves should be sealed, meanwhile, get out your hammer, a roll of wire mesh and enclose the eaves and the spaces beneath the house. Put screens on the doors and windows.

You've done what you can beforehand, but what do you do if

a bushfire is moving toward your house?

First of all, keep calm. Secondly, call your local fire brigade. Never assume that someone else has told them.

Next, close all the windows and doors and block any other openings; the ceiling is a danger spot so place a bucket of water inside the manhole. Fill the bath with water and throw in blankets.

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Get the garden hoses ready. Block gutter downpipes with rags or a tennis ball and fill the gutters with water. Spray the side of the house facing the flames. Fill tins and buckets and place them around the house.

Park the car on the lawn, close the windows and doors and put blankets, water and a first aid kit inside.

If the fire is getting close, dress in long pants, long-sleeved woollen sweaters, sturdy boots. Wear a helmet or a hat.

When the fire reaches the edge of your property, there will be a great deal of activity as fire fighters battle the front. Your house is the safest place to be, provided you've followed these guidelines. Stick to it,

The horrifying Dwellingup fire of 1961 wiped out an entire town, and several smaller settlements.



watching the inside closely for signs of intruding embers. Use plenty of water to douse the surrounding grass.

If the worst happens and your house does catch fire and you cannot control it, retreat to the car and sit tight until the front passes. Do not attempt to drive off through smoke and flames. Panic-stricken drivers on roads blocked by fellow drivers or fallen debris and fire trucks are a recipe for disaster!

You must drink plenty of water yourself. Up to 2 litres per hour is needed for the heavy physical work of fire-fighting. The smoke, heat and tension may cause you to feel weak, giddy, and nauseated. These are the early symptoms of heat exhaustion. If you feel any of these symptoms, if breathing becomes difficult or the heat too intense let someone know, go inside and drink small quantities of saline water frequently.

Once the fire front has passed and you're safe and sound, check the house thoroughly to track down any hot spots, small fires, smouldering material or glowing embers. Seek medical help for heat exhaustion.

More information on safeguarding your house and your family against fire is available in a number of brochures published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Bush Fires Board, and from research papers by the CSIRO:

'Bushfires and Safety' is free with this issue of *Landscape*, more copies are available from CALM, 50 Hayman Road, Como, 6152. 'Protect Your Home From Bushfire!' and 'Bushfire Safety in Urban Fringe Areas', are available from the Bush Fires Board of W.A., 201 Kent St, Kensington.

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Cover Photo

We've heard of wolves baying at the moon, but frogs? Obviously, this amphibian is not above displaying a little lunacy. Nor is the photographer, Jiri Lochman, who must have been moonstruck to get this superb shot.

EDITORIAL

Every year at this time the subject of bush fires becomes a preoccupation with land managers. Steps must be taken to ready fire-fighters and their equipment; hazards must be identified and minimised; education programs for neighbours and visitors must be renewed. Fires are inevitable. The combination of hot, dry weather, inflammable fuels in the bush and ignition from lightning or careless people will see to it that almost every day over the next few months Conservation and Land Management Staff or Bush Fire Brigades will be fighting a bush fire somewhere in the State. Because of modern technology and efficient fire control practices, land managers these days can very largely determine the fire regime which is to be applied in a given area. For example, in most of the land CALM is responsible for, the policy is to try to keep fire out, pending a better understanding of ecological requirements. In a small proportion of the CALM estate (notably parts of the south-west forests), regular, controlled burning is done. The aim of this operation is to minimise the risk of serious wildfires in places where values are highest. The most important value to be considered in the South-West is human life. In this edition of *Landscape* readers are urged to recognise their individual responsibilities. Most importantly, these are to make their own houses safe from bush fires and to learn how to look after themselves and their families if a fire occurs. This dual approach by land managers and householders will help combat the worst consequences of one of nature's most dangerous and predictably-occurring events: the Australian summer bushfire.

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