Taking the flammability of individual pieces of plant is usually done by taking a section of leaf and subjecting it to a flame and measuring how quickly it burns. If you are wondering about the flammability of a few different plants, you can get a good idea using an LPG torch on dry sites. The outcome of these activities such as clearing and fuel reduction burning, aim to lower the fuel for bushfires that around every house in bushfire prone areas there should be a zone where vegetation and other fuels are minimal (the Building Protection Zone) and that this zone should be surrounded by a further zone where fuels are maintained at a low level (the Fuel Modified Zone). The widths of these zones vary with slopes from 10 to 50 metres, and descriptions, widths and other information can be found at www.fire.tas.gov.au. When choosing fire retardant plants, other attributes should be taken into consideration such as their ability to regenerate following fire. If fire retardant plants are to be grown, a firm commitment must be made to regularly maintain them or they may become a fire hazard. This includes sufficient watering, so a high leaf moisture content is maintained, the removal of dead material and regular pruning of lower branches. Water availability is likely to be a problem in the drier months when the threat of fire is greatest. When choosing fire retardant species their water requirements need to be considered. There is no point growing plants as fire retardant species which hold up lots of fuel; plants with smooth bark are better than those with ribbon and rough bark. All gardeners should be aware that some plants are not wanted in the bush even if they are valued in the garden. Unfortunately there are many ornamental plants which can really take off when they get into the bush. Some do so well they choke out the natives, like blackberries, or become a fire hazard, like gorse.

Environmental Weeds

It is also necessary to realise that establishing a fire resistant garden will take time, money and a lot of hard work. Many plants do not reach maturity for up to 15 years and therefore will not provide effective fire protection for sometime. In comparison, other plants have shorter life spans and may continually need to be replaced.

Environmental Weeds

The influence of plant shape is a lot more subjective: low growing plants and ground covers are better than shrubs; perennials with dense foliage and ground covers are better than those with open airy crowns; plants which don’t retain dead material are better than those which hold up lots of fuel; plants with smooth bark are better than those with ribbons and rough bark. The trouble with a lot of the books is they don’t tell us which aspects of flammability are included and how they are combined. There are two basic factors to be considered in determining a plant’s flammability: the first is how readily its parts burn and the second is how its leaves and fruit trees (most of which have very low flammabilities) or some of the less flammable ornamentals as part of your fire protection strategy. Planning these species close to the structure and planting the natives further away also reduces the risk of these exotic species escaping into the bush. Tasmania Fire Service recommends that around every house in bushfire prone areas there should be a zone where vegetation and other fuels are minimal (the Building Protection Zone) and that this zone should be surrounded by a further zone where fuels are maintained at a low level (the Fuel Modified Zone). The widths of these zones vary with slopes from 10 to 50 metres, and descriptions, widths and other information can be found at www.fire.tas.gov.au. When choosing fire retardant plants, other attributes should be taken into consideration such as their ability to regenerate following fire. If fire retardant plants are to be grown, a firm commitment must be made to regularly maintain them or they may become a fire hazard. This includes sufficient watering, so a high leaf moisture content is maintained, the removal of dead material and regular pruning of lower branches. Water availability is likely to be a problem in the drier months when the threat of fire is greatest. When choosing fire retardant species their water requirements need to be considered. There is no point growing plants as a protective measure against fire if they are doing the thing they are most needed. Indeed, all dead plant material will be a fire hazard.

Environmental Weeds

The Role of Replacement Planting

Fire resisting plants can absorb more of the heat of the approaching bushfire without burning than more flammable plants. They can trap burning embers and sparks and slow down the spread of fire. Hazard reduction activities such as clearing and fuel reduction burning, aim to lower the vegetation hazard to a safe level. Because some plants have a higher resistance to burning than others, we can use low flammability plants for added protection in addition to normal maintenance and hazard reduction activities.

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Flame resisting garden plants for the urban fringe and rural areas

Introduction
All vegetation will burn in a bushfire and pose a hazard to people and their homes. However, not all vegetation has the same flammability and there is great potential for protecting in bushfire prone areas to reduce their fire hazard by changing the plants in their gardens.

Flammability Groups
In the following list E denotes an exotic plant, TN a plant native to Tasmania, AN a plant native to mainland Australia and X a known environmental weed.

High Flammability
These plants have been shown to be highly flammable and should not be planted or allowed to remain inside your house’s Building Protection Zone. They should also be avoided in the Fuel Modified Zone. Move these plants away from your house and replace them with less flammable plants.

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Moderate Flammability
These plants should be avoided in the Building Protection Zone. They should not be allowed to dominate your garden and should be well maintained, being especially careful to remove dead material before it accumulates.

Low Flammability
These plants are acceptable in the Building Protection Zone and will be valuable replacements for more flammable plants.

Photographs of selected plants by Alan Macfadyen, Original research and publication supported by the Tasmanian Fire Research Fund. Revision 3, 2006.

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