

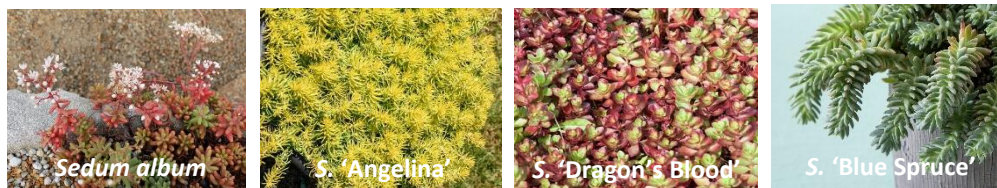
Idaho Firewise Internship 2022 Take Aways

Written by M. Williams

Last April, I was granted the opportunity to take on an internship with Idaho Firewise. I learned many things about creating defensible space with plant choices in landscapes around homes. This practice is of personal importance to me as the home my family is building resides in an area with frequent fire activity. I learned there is more to consider than general plant requirements and tolerances when choosing the right plant for the right place. There is understanding plant size at maturity when establishing appropriate spacing. There is considering the invasiveness of the plant or natural tendency to spread beyond desired plant density. There is knowing the potential of a plant's flammability when choosing placement. There are also elevational limitations when it comes to heat tolerance, as well as drought tolerance. Regular observation and maintenance are a must for Firewise landscaping effectiveness. The Idaho Firewise demonstration garden provides great examples of plants that work for any landscape within our climactic region. My time was well spent under the combined direction of Brett Van Paepghem and Andrea Dorman. In depth discussions during regular maintenance helped me formulate ideas and takeaways that I plan to use not only for my own purposes, but for those whom I will design and consult for in the future. This article will touch on some of the plant choice topics that stood out to me.

The space around an Idaho Firewise home is broken down into three zones, of which I am emphasizing my comments to the more maintained zones of 1 and 2. These zones originate from the main structure or home and are delineated by measured invisible boundaries within a 100' radius. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standard identifies the first zone as the first five feet out from around the home. The second zone consists of the space within the next 5' to 30'. The third zone encompasses the remaining 30' to 100'. With every landscape, there are necessary exceptions, but the principles remain the same in promoting the best protection for any given site. Supplemental summer watering is important for the first two zones and having a backup emergency water source is also good to have on hand in the event of fire.

In the case of plant choices for zone 1, it is recommended to incorporate plants that are low to the ground and of high-water content. Plants such as succulents, cacti or non-volatile lawn-type ground coverings are suitable for this zone. Some of my favorite stonecrop selections from the demonstration garden are *Sedum album*, *S. rupestre* 'Angelina', *S. spurium* 'Dragon's Blood', and *S. reflexum* 'Blue Spruce'.



Another succulent of varying texture is the thick, stout leaves of hens and chicks. I gravitate to *Sempervivum arachnoideum* with its frosted, white-topped spidery fibers, and *Sempervivum* 'Red Beauty' for its subtle mahogany that contrasts with *S. Chick Charms*® 'Gold Nugget'.



Another favorite of mine is *Delosperma*, a succulent that produces an attractive bloom in vibrant hard to miss colors. Pictured right, *Delosperma* Granita® orange ice plant is by far the most dramatic with its brilliant pure copper sheen.



The variety in color and texture these plants exhibit feed my need for a diverse palette in producing a myriad of carpeted designs. It was challenging for me throughout my internship to rein in my desire to want to fill every nook and cranny of my own space with as many plants as possible. The beautiful part of zone 1 plants is that they are welcome in zone 2 and 3. Their addition supports unity of design bringing the three zones together. Yes, they make for great ground cover, and they spread to fill in open space which is wonderful. However, there were two things I kept in mind to curb my enthusiasm for these plants. One, is that even though they hold more water and have a fire-resistant foliage, they do at some point in the season flower. This flower dries up. Its accumulation with many more around it can create a fuel source ignitable with the right conditions and sparks. The removal of these spent flowers becomes necessary and the time it takes to accomplish this simple task falls on the vastness of the plants permitted to expand. Secondly, this balance between space and plant plays into a homeowner's ability to maintain the appropriate function. Spacing is not only important in preventing the accumulation of ladder fuels, but also in creating a patchwork to break up the continuity of a fuel source. It is important to keep in mind a person's time management and ability to keep up with the maintenance requirements at any scale, whether hired out or personally managed. There are a variety of mulches that work in tandem with the three Firewise zones. These mulches appropriately cover the earth, help to create breaks in between plants, and ease the maintenance need. Rock products such as pea gravel, sand, decomposed granite, or crushed lava rock make for easily maintained mulches in planting beds and paths. They aide in ground moisture retention, help prevent soil compaction for space unoccupied by plants and make for an easy medium to weed quickly with simple tools.

Plant choices for zone 2 are identified as 'low, lean, and green' in Idaho Firewise literature. These plants are also maintained and kept green. They too could be lawn types or shrubberies that are low growing and devoid of volatile chemicals that burn easily. They can also have high water carrying capacities or contain chemical components that resist fire such as pectin content from various fruiting plants, or a latex content found in butterfly weed, they can even have a soap content. The desert willow, *Chilopsis linearis*, is one such summer flowering tall shrub/small tree that holds more water. Removal of dead branches each spring is recommended and other than that a cutting back of whole branches every three years can keep it rejuvenated and control overall size if space is a concern.



Photo left: *Chilopsis linearis* pollard rejuvenation cuts made on June 22, 2022, at Idaho Firewise demonstration garden.

Photo right: Same *Chilopsis linearis* five weeks later, July 27, 2022.

The reiteration of a patchwork design of interspersing taller forbs and shrubs within vegetative gaps of zone 2 continues to limit vegetative continuity and reduces the potential of a fire to carry. As for plant choices with pectin content, creeping cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster adpressus* v. *thymifolius*), and chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa* Low Scape Mound®) are great low growing low maintenance shrubs. Both bring a flare of red to the autumn palette; the cotoneaster with its red berries and the chokeberry with its leaves accented by black fruit, pictured right.



Photos below: Three plants that repeatedly captured my attention in the garden and are high in soap content were snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), giant flowered soapwort (*Saponaria x lempergii*), and mock orange (*Philadelphus species*).



The native snowberry performs well and holds long seasonal interests throughout the year. It is known to send out suckers for new plants, but it has not been a problem with the low watering regiment it receives at the garden. The giant flowered soapwort blooms late summer and its foliage holds its greenness very well throughout the whole growing season. There is a smaller flowered soapwort (*Saponaria ocymoides*) that blooms early spring here, but it fizzles out by summer and does not hold on to its greenness in our hot summers without the help of afternoon shade or extra watering. However, at higher elevations with slightly cooler daytime temperatures this plant does very well. After an initial deadheading, *S. ocymoides* will even put on a second round of blooms, even if not as floriferous as the first round. The mock orange, also referred to as a syringa (our state flower), has enjoyed a diverse experimental trial basis at the garden with 12 different cultivars including our native *Philadelphus lewisii*. Brett's best performer is *Philadelphus hybrid* 'Buckley's Quill', a double petaled bloomer. This mock orange maintains a more compact height compared to the straight species and some other cultivars and seems to handle the heat better than others. I, myself, had a fondness for the single petaled, large bloomed *Philadelphus x hybrid* 'Fallbrook'. This mock orange has blooms with a sunny open center adding a splash of brightness, as if ready to receive any pollinators. The timing at which these different cultivars bloom lengthens the flowering season at the garden and extends the wonderful fragrance they give off. Some of these mock orange varieties can become quite tall and our native plant is unpredictable depending on site conditions. A similar pruning strategy every few years as with the *Chilopsis* helps maintain the vigor and size of these shrubs.

As with other native plants species, one of the challenges many homeowners face is adapting to and finding suitable plants for the decrease in size of home landscapes. Many desirable native plants do not behave in a manner that would accommodate a small yard or better yet minimize the need for extra maintenance. There are efforts moving forward to assist in this challenge. Plant Select is one such resource to help with this need. Natives still have a place in our landscapes and by supplementing with cultivars we can add to our success in so many ways. Through our thoughtful considerations in the choices we make and our diligent efforts at maintaining and learning from our choices, our Firewise landscape will not only help us defend our space but also give us a beautiful and manageable landscape.

References:

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