

Yelling ‘Fire’ in a Crowded Woodland

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Neighbors discover that underneath all that brush is an inviting canyon just waiting to be explored.

It began with a surprise bill for \$2,983 and ended with a picnic in our newly uncovered park. The bill was courtesy of our property insurer, alerting us to expect this annual increase unless we cleared the brush and limbed up the oaks 200 feet on each side of our house. Sustainable fire-scaping was requiring our special efforts to mitigate living at the edge of “wilderness.”



Karen Telleen-Lawton (Don Matsumoto photo)

My first response was frustration and anger. We’d just completed a major — for us — landscape job inspired by fire protection. We’d ringed the house in succulents, added to the backyard barrier of citrus trees, and inserted a firebreak of *Opuntia* into the adjacent section of woodland canyon. The oaks close to our home were limbed up the required six feet. We considered it a decent effort.

From our insurer’s perspective, the north and east sides were adequately cleared, but our west side succulents dropped off steeply into an arroyo choked with castor bean and feral figs among the oaks, willows and poison oak. Although the front side is protected by a concrete parking pad, driveway and the street, it sits less than 200 feet from a similarly tangled ravine belonging to a neighbor.

After a few clarifying calls, we faced the situation: clearing the required footage would be expensive but less in the long run than this bloated insurance premium. Plus, of course, our home would more likely survive the inevitable next wildfire. Resolved, we hoped to share the pain. We met with our neighbors on the two offending sides, asking if they'd pay the cost for the work on their properties. They quickly agreed (much to my relief), and soon I was getting competitive bids for the three-property project.

The city of Santa Barbara was in the middle of its annual “free chipping” campaign. I had already signed up to receive wood chips; now I'd do my part as a contributor. I re-contacted the Fire Department's Phil Faulding, who graciously came to assess the project and determine where to dump chips. They were thrilled with the scope of work, assuring us that the additional brush clearing could indeed save our house — and firefighters' lives — in years to come.

Power saws roared through the canyon with the sound of hawk-sized bees. Men sawed and dragged, uncovering topography I'd never seen before. Bright orange, branch-eating chippers added their roar to the cacophony of saws. Branches piled up faster than they were chewed down; in the evenings we strolled through a deep branch canyon. My neighbor, Susan, said she half expected to see a hobbit family walking down the twiggy path to Toad Hollow. She and Dennis were as amazed as we were at the canyon park emerging from this previously inaccessible ravine.

The saws fell silent after a week, replaced by frantic activity of birds trying to make sense of their new surroundings. Now we had a lovely oak park with a view of our seasonal tributary creek winding among willows. On Friday we bundled blankets, beach chairs and hors d'oeuvres into baskets for a picnic with Susan and Dennis in the new park. Susan and I discovered a host of native plants: honeysuckle, hummingbird sage, snowberry, wild cucumber — once choked by weeds but now ready to reclaim the restored canyon. The men folk dreamed of augmenting the park's sustainable landscape with what the steep slopes and newly opened pathways between trees seemed to beg — a zip line for grandkids real and imagined.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's Serendipity column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. [Click here](#) to graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon.

