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Serendipity: An Insider's View of the Jesusita Fire

The blaze comes too close for comfort — to within about 10 yards of home



The Jesusita Fire burned through the newly landscaped backyard, to within about 10 yards of the house. The house across the street, as well as the one behind, are gone. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 05.11.2009

There's nothing like a wildfire in your neighborhood to make you think about living lean, green and sustainably in the fiery West. The good thing is, firefighters did a masterful job battling the Jesusita Fire. The bad thing is, they've had way too much experience lately.

The police knocked on our door in the early afternoon of May 5, hand-delivering the mandatory evacuation message. We already had packed the cars using an evacuation list updated from the Tea Fire. We were just picking up second-tier items as we came upon them: an Indian rug, some jewelry, food from the refrigerator. I even added an entire change of clothes, instead of just underwear.

Even before the Tea Fire, I had organized the evacuation list by timetable. There's a 10-minute list, which includes turning off the gas and loading the Prius with eight recycled plastic tubs filled loosely with scrapbooks and memorabilia. The tubs leave just enough room in the car for the driver, and each has space at the top for adding nonstored items: cell phone charger, camera and camera battery charger, back-up disk drive and a change of clothes.



The 20-minute to-do list included throwing the patio furniture off the deck — we learned this because Tea firefighters did this for us — and spraying fire foam to protect our Achilles' heel: the wooden deck, including the windows and nearby shrubs.

With those things accomplished and a few more random items collected, we left about 45 minutes after our evacuation order. Truth is, I felt pretty prepared, even smug, about our efficient evacuation list as well as the defensible space around our house. The smugness wore off quickly the next afternoon, with the arrival of devastating sundowner winds. This was really real.

On Thursday, we set out at 5 a.m., prepared to park as close as we could and hike to whatever ridge was within sight of our street. About 6:30 a.m., we scrambled up the ridge where Mount Calvary burned in the Tea Fire, peering through binoculars at the new devastation below.

My first reaction at seeing the roof of the house was giddiness. I remember chatting with the bleary-eyed firefighters who were stationed there. Then we began placing calls to neighbors to tell them what we saw: The house across from ours, belonging to good friends the Ackerts, was gone, as was the house behind us. Most of the houses were forlorn islands in a black sea. We couldn't actually see our house behind singed oaks, but we thought the roof was a good sign.

It was only on our return three days later that we learned our backyard burned to within about 10 yards of the house (no landscape insurance). I found a strange fascination with imagining how the flames progressed and where the firefighters must have stood. Hoses were attached serially and strewn around, later to melt

and burn. Ash, twigs and mud debris littered the driveway. Smoke filled the house.

The Morongo Band of Mission Indians from Banning, headed by Fire Capt. Dan Casner, left a smudgy business card on the front door. Our next-door neighbors got a handwritten note praising our joint defensible space and crediting our work with their ability to save the homes.

Hail to the firefighters!

[Click here](#) for an evacuation checklist. [Click here](#) for more information about defensible space, and, when it reopens, [click here](#) to check out the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden nursery for native plants.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*