

Inspection leads to better defensible space

By Kathryn Reed

“My goal here is when I leave your house it has a chance.”

A chance to survive a fire that is.

Tyler Jack is a South Lake Tahoe Fire Department captain who does defensible space inspections.

He likes the composite roof. But there are pine needles that need to come down.

The rounds of wood near the house are not so good.



South Lake Tahoe fire Capt. Tyler Jack marks a tree that needs to come down. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The prickly plant life on the other side of the fence that I considered California Tahoe Conservancy's issue really isn't. I suddenly realize a bunch of it is on our property line even though it's on the other side of the fence. That's going to have to go away.

At first I tried to cheat on my inspection. The day before

Jack came over I moved stacked wood off the fence line and into the shed. But I came clean when he arrived. Something about lying to a firefighter seemed really wrong. And lying about the wood, well, he was going to figure it out.

The distances between our house, the fence and then the neighbor's are ridiculously close. That's the fence where the wood that doesn't fit in the shed goes. It's there for much of the fall, with most getting used up during the winter. There is no way to create the buffer like the defensible space guidelines suggest.

"We like gaps because it breaks up the fire spread," Jack said. "We recommend mosaic landscaping."

Next winter's wood will be stacked in a longer row and not directly against the fence. Then it will be covered with fire-retardant tarps. Until the inspection I had no idea such tarps existed.

The wood against the old cinder fireplace wall is fine. That is not flammable.

Having some of our Tahoe Regional Planning Agency-mandated erosion control measures in place gives us that mosaic look Jack talked about. We have some rock by the house for the drip line before fire would get to the wood siding.

Our layer of wood chips is much thinner than what TRPA first had us lay down. Now it's scattered – more to the liking of fire officials, and finally accepted by TRPA.

"Basically, we want a moat around your house," Jack says as we look at where the chips and pine needles are. Some raking is needed.

He looks at the wood deck. Fortunately, nothing is stored under it. Some pine needles are in the gaps – those can be swept out.

One of the trees out back now has a red spot on it. It will be coming down. At least we didn't have to pay for that tree felling permit. It's over 14 inches, so a permit is required.

No violations are found, so Jack won't have to come back.

These inspections are free and are done by local firefighters. It just takes a phone call to set things up. The purpose is to ensure your house is protected as well as it can be in the event of a fire; whether it's a wildland fire or your neighbor's place goes up and threatens yours. This article tells more from the firefighter's point-of-view.