

Rebuilding workshop teaches fire-resilient strategies



Linda Gibbs, an advocate for soil reconstruction, displayed the different types of techniques for healthier soil during the Rebuilding Resilience workshop at the Malibu City Hall on Friday, April 27. (Barbara Burke/22nd Century Media)

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Homeowners whose homes were damaged or destroyed by the Woolsey Fire gathered on Friday, April 27, at the Malibu City Hall to participate in Rebuilding Resilience: A Hands-on-Workshop with Green Architects and Engineers.

The program was co-hosted by Global Green, an environmental organization that fosters a shift toward a sustainable future; the U.S Green Building Council-Los Angeles; and The City of Malibu's Environmental Sustainability Department.

Since the Woolsey Fire, there has been a multitude of community meetings and, as Mayor Pro Tem Karen Farrer stated, "some Malibuites are beginning to suffer from meeting fatigue"; however, the workshop provided attendees with practical information about fire-resilient building strategies and landscaping, water efficiency, local building codes, solar technologies and utility incentives.

The event also afforded attendees an opportunity to meet one-on-one with design professionals.

Sharon Williams, communications director for Global Green, welcomed attendees, noting that "the Woolsey Fire provides an opportunity to establish a new foundation for a resilient and green future for Malibu."

Cassy Aoyagi, a board member of the US Green Building Council-LA and a member of the LA County Planning Department's Significant Ecological Areas Technical Advisory Committee, gave the first keynote address, which focused on various ways to design landscaping to prevent fires from decimating a property.

"Trees are pivotal in designing landscapes that are fire-resilient. Trees do not just provide a cooler environment; rather, they act as soldiers around a property and can protect structures from fire," Aoyagi said. "One can think of them as catcher's mitts because they can catch and trap embers that can travel onto a property from up to three miles away."

Aoyagi emphasized that trees and shrubs should be placed where they can grow to their full size unimpeded by other foliage or structures.

"A minimum of 5 feet of defensible space is needed around a home because one wants a firefighter to feel comfortable to turn his back away from a home to defend it," she said. "It is critical that one ensures that there are no door mats, patio cushions or other flammable items in that space and that rain gutters do not attract fire."

She showed a series of pictures illustrating how using the right plants can make a landscaped area resistant to fires and how using rain gardens also assist in such efforts.

Heather Rosenberg, founder of the Building Resilience Network and USGBC-LA/Building Resilience-L.A program, addressed the importance of having connected and prepared communities.

"It is important to understand what hazards you face, what you need to do to mitigate risks, how to transfer risk through insurance and how to make good decisions regarding what risks you are just going to accept," she said.

In one-on-one consultations, some of the displaying experts included Malibu's Linda Gibbs, an advocate for Kiss the Ground, a nonprofit focusing on regenerative agriculture.

Gibbs showed attendees how important it is to grow healthy soil structure, the foundation for creating fire-and-drought-resilient landscaping.

“Much of soil life is fed by liquid carbon compounds produced by photosynthesis which is exuded via living plant roots,” she said. “Soil life needs protection from heat, pounding rain and wind so one should keep soil covered year-round, preferably with plants and a layer of plant litter.”

To accomplish those goals, Gibbs recommends “reducing or eliminating tillage and utilizing a diverse plant system instead of a monoculture because plant diversity increases diversity in soil microorganisms, beneficial insects and other species.”

Noting that well-maintained and intelligently selected plants that are suited to local climate are more resistant to fire, Robert Sjoquist, owner of Soil Solutions Inc., discussed various types of ground cover that require less water than traditional sod varieties, including fescues and bent grass.

“Some of these California native grasses are very versatile and can be maintained as turf lawns, whereas others can be kept un-mowed to create a meadow-like appearance,” he said. “These types of grasses use a lot less water and their root systems help to prevent soil erosion.”

Elaine Rene-Weissman, owner and architect at ERW Design in Malibu, and Jon Donley, a construction consultant, provided useful information about building codes and green building codes applicable to fire rebuild projects.

Maureen Erbeznik, of Malibu Smart, discussed the program’s enhanced smart home irrigation incentives that provide rebates to homeowners of up to \$10,000 when they install a smart irrigation package, including pressure regulators, drip irrigation systems and flow sensors. The program also offers homeowners a rebate up to \$3 per square foot for lawn replacements.

“Malibu Smart keeps a list of approved contractors, but if a homeowner wants to use his own contractor, we can work with that contractor to become approved.” Erbeznik said.