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Fire retardants that protect the home

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By Sam Byker
Special to The Times
November 25, 2007

Scott Garrett got the evacuation order at 6 a.m. on Oct. 22. His Lake Arrowhead home lay in the path of the Grass Valley fire, and flames would arrive within hours.

Garrett rushed to his garage, where he kept 15 gallons of a flame-retardant spray called Safe-T-Guard. Using a garden sprayer, he applied the clear liquid to his 5,500-square-foot home's decks, eaves and wood siding.

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Though houses up and down Garrett's street burned in the blaze, his remained standing. Garrett later found a 3-inch-long blackened ember that had been blown onto his deck. The wood around it had charred but hadn't caught fire -- thanks, he said, to the spray.

"Every one of the neighbors around here wants to get some now," Garrett said.

Garrett's neighbors aren't the only ones. Manufacturers of products such as Safe-T-Guard have seen interest soar in the wake of the fires. And San Diego-based Fire Etc. reports that sales of some of its home fire-retardant products have doubled in recent weeks.

The state of California mandates that fire-retardant materials be used in commercial buildings, including churches and senior centers. But even California's strict regulations weren't enough to save Malibu Presbyterian Church, which burned to the ground during the October wildfires.

Residential properties face no such mandate, so home fire protection is largely a do-it-yourself enterprise. Homeowners should never rely solely on fire retardants for protection, said David Dua, president of Fire Etc. No product is fail-safe; most are far from it.

Smart fire prevention includes clearing brush and debris away from all structures. Woodpiles should be kept at least

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30 feet away from the home as well. And when a blaze is on its way, a well-thought-out evacuation plan is far more important than anything sold in a store, experts agree. Even Garrett says that he was foolish not to evacuate. "It was really crazy and dangerous and dumb, and I don't know that I would do it again," he said. But he does swear by the product that he says spared his house.

There are many fire-retardant products available in California, but few are widely marketed to consumers. Garrett learned about Safe-T-Guard through his work as a textile specialist on film sets, where he treated fabrics with the liquid

to protect them from open flame. Realizing how useful the product could be, he decided to keep some in case of emergency.

Now, more and more companies are manufacturing products aimed specifically at homeowners. Some can protect homes for years with one application; others are designed to be used only as a wildfire approaches.

Here is a sampling:

* Thermo-Gel, sold by Fire Etc. of San Diego, is a concentrate that, when mixed with water, becomes a heat-absorbing Class A fire retardant. (In laboratory testing, Class A retardants slow the spread of flames by 75% or more; Class B retardants, by 25% to 75%.) The gel works only for five to eight hours after application, so it's designed to be applied as a fire approaches. Fire Etc. markets Thermo-Gel as part of a \$330 homeowner kit, which includes four 1-gallon containers of gel along with an applicator nozzle that allows them to be screwed onto a garden hose for application to a home, car or yard. The distributor claims the kit will cover 4,000 square feet.

Several government agencies in California use Thermo-Gel, including the San Bernardino County Fire Department and the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, said Chad Nelson, sales manager at Thermo Technologies, which manufactures the gel. Some homeowners, however, have complained that the gel can be messy and difficult to apply.

Fire Etc. also markets the Fire Marshal Pool Pump, a \$1,295 system that lets homeowners use their pool water to fight fires. The pump comes with a 100-foot hose and adjustable nozzle and can take in up to 70 gallons of water per minute and shoot it out in a high-velocity stream with about half the power of an average firetruck hose, the company said. Fire Etc. is currently sold out of the pumps due to a surge in interest following the recent wildfires, Duea said. The company now has a waiting list.

Thermo-Gel and the Fire Marshal Pool Pump can be ordered at www.fire-etc.com or by calling (619) 525-7286.

* Barricade International's Home Kit Complete is a similar product. It comes with 4 gallons of Class A fire-retardant gel, which the company estimates will cover 2,000 to 2,800 square feet. The gel can be applied through a garden hose applicator nozzle, which is included in the kit and, under normal conditions, will last from eight to 24 hours on the side of a home (though in high winds such as those experienced during the recent wildfires, it may last as little as four hours). Barricade's gel is currently used by the Los Angeles City Fire Department. Homeowners can purchase the kit for \$326 at www.barricadegel.com or by calling (800) 201-3927.

* Safe-T-Guard, manufactured by Santa Clarita-based Firetect, is a clear, odorless and nontoxic Class B fire retardant that can be used on wood, paper and some fabrics. Homeowners can apply Safe-T-Guard, as Garrett did, with a simple garden sprayer for large projects. A household spray bottle can be used for smaller ones, and unopened containers of the retardant will last up to 10 years. Safe-T-Guard is intended for long-term indoor use, not for a last-minute outdoor application like Garrett's. A gallon costs \$31.95.

* WT102, also sold by Firetect, is a latex-based paint that acts as a Class A fire retardant. WT102 works with water-soluble tints and can be applied like any paint. About \$40 per gallon, it has a shelf life of two years.

Although some homeowners have used WT102 and Safe-T-Guard on home exteriors, they haven't

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been tested or approved for outdoor use and will decay over time, said Firetect President Kathleen Newman. WT102, though, might last for 10 or more years on a home exterior, Newman added. Both products are available at www.firetect.com or by calling (800) 380-8801.

* Flame Resist, made by Hy-Tech Thermal Solutions of Florida, is a clear, fire-retardant coating that sells for \$70 per gallon. It too has not been approved for outdoor use. Hy-Tech claims that it will last 14 to 18 months on the exterior of a home before reapplication is necessary. It can be applied with a garden sprayer.

Flame Guard, also made by Hy-Tech, is a granular paint additive sold for \$10 per 6-ounce package. One package added to a gallon of paint gives it a Class B rating; two, a Class A. Flame Guard works only with interior flat latex paint, available at most hardware stores. Flame Resist and Flame Guard can be purchased at www.hytechsales.com or by calling (866) 649-8324.

* A higher-end interior paint is available from International Fire Resistant Systems, based in Marin County. The company's Class A latex-based FF88 has been used in the Pentagon and the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. It too can be tinted to a custom color and applied like a regular paint, but its price -- \$315 for a 5-gallon container -- may be out of range for some homeowners, even if they want the cachet of matching the Green Zone's most coveted address.

Those interested can go to www.firefree.com, or call (415) 459-6488.

* The Foamsafe FireMaster, designed by Oregon-based Consumer Fire Products Inc., is a high-end system designed to protect a property automatically in the event of a wildfire. Starting at just under \$20,000, including installation, each FireMaster includes a compressed foam system (shaped like an outdoor air-conditioning unit), a water tank, a set of roof-mounted fire detectors, and a network of tubing connected to emitters placed on the home and around the property.

When the detectors sense an approaching fire (a feat the company claims these devices can perform at a distance of half a mile), the system activates and begins spraying the home and yard with a Class A fire retardant foam called Silv-ex. Think of it as an automatic sprinkler system for the outdoors.

Each FireMaster system comes with 10 gallons of foam concentrate, which retails for about \$20 per gallon and has a shelf-life of 20 to 25 years.

After a fire is detected and the system finishes its spray cycle, it temporarily deactivates and re-scans several hours later. If it still senses a fire, it sprays the home again. Each coat can last for up to 12 hours.

For an added fee, the system can be activated online; another added feature allows it to call up to four phone numbers as an alert of its activation.

Consumer Fire Products has sold fewer than 100 of the systems so far, said co-founder and Chief Executive Irene Rhodes. For more information, call (866) 901-2374, or visit www.consumerfireproducts.com.

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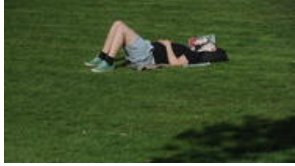
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