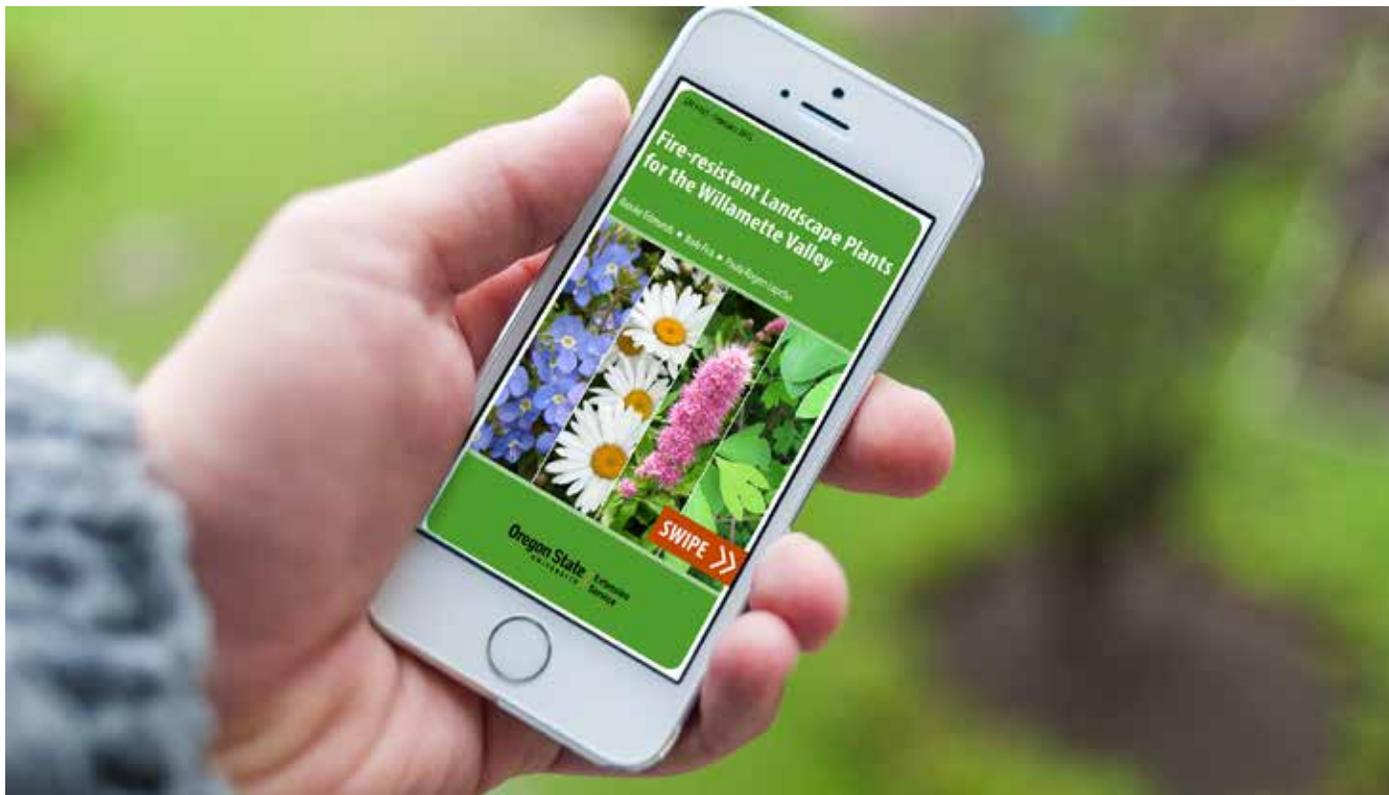


Gardening on the go

New mobile app helps pick plants for a fire-resistant landscape



Fire-Resistant Landscape Plants for the Willamette Valley, the mobile application developed by OSU Extension Service, is essentially a gardening pocket guide for your smartphone. Free to download, it lists more than 170 fire-resistant ground covers, perennials, shrubs, woody vines and trees.

By Brooke Edmunds

Nurseries, retail centers and university extension services are increasingly using mobile technology to connect with new customers and provide horticulture education.

One type of mobile technology is an application (usually shortened to mobile app or just app), a self-contained program designed for smartphones and/or tablets.

Apps can be simple, mobile-optimized publications; they can contain embedded videos or games; or

they can be interactive with complex search capabilities.

For the nursery or industry sector, an app can be linked using a QR code from a plant label to provide customers with even more information on the plant and other products offered.

Apps in action

At Oregon State University, the OSU Extension Service responds to the needs of Oregon citizens by publishing information in many different formats, including factsheets, bulletins, blogs ▶

and social media. Much of that information is beginning to be repackaged into mobile apps.

A recent example is a newly published (February 2015) mobile app focused on fire-resistant plantings. The Fire-Resistant Landscape Plants for the Willamette Valley app was developed in direct response to local needs.

The Willamette Valley is known for mild, wet winters, but summer droughts leave the valley as vulnerable to wildfires as drier areas of the state. Local governments are recommending that homeowners create defensible space around structures to protect them from windblown embers and break up the line of vegetation and fire fuels. (For more on this concept, and how it can be applied in landscaping, please see “Not burning down the house,” starting on Page 29 in the August Farwest

Edition of *Digger*.)

Funding to produce the mobile app was provided by Title III grant funds allocated by the Benton County Board of Commissioners.

The app builds on an existing OSU Extension publication (*Fire-resistant Plants for Oregon Home Landscapes PNW 590*) and provides regional plant selections that can be incorporated into a fire-resistant landscape. Authored by faculty in the Horticulture Department at Oregon State University and published by the Oregon State University Extension Service, the app is available as a free download for iOS and Android. A mobile-optimized PDF is also available.

Essentially a pocket guide, this app describes a diverse list of more than 170 fire-resistant ground covers, perennials, shrubs, woody vines and trees. No plant



Screenshot of scrollable 'Shrubs & Woody Vines' table of contents.



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should be considered truly fire proof; however, these plants are considered to be fire-resistant because they have the following characteristics:

- They are high in moisture with supple leaves.
- Deadwood does not accumulate within the plant.
- They have a water-like sap.
- They have low resin levels.

Features which make plants more likely to be flammable include excessive deadwood or needles; sap or leaves containing volatile components like terpenes, wax or oils; leaves having a strong odor when crushed; sap that is gummy or resin-like; and papery or shaggy bark.

Examples of highly flammable plants include spruce, bitterbrush, birch and juniper.

The fire-resistant list for the Willamette Valley includes many Pacific Northwest natives such as kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos* spp.), Oregon grape (*Berberis aquifolium*) and vine maple (*Acer circinatum*).

Also considered fire-resistant are some standards of Oregon gardens: geraniums (*Geranium* spp.), hosta (*Hosta* spp.), coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and daylily (*Hemerocallis* spp.).

Shrubs that are good replacements for more flammable evergreens include mock orange (*Philadelphus* spp.), rhododendron and azalea (*Rhododendron* spp.), and daphne (*Daphne × burkwoodii*).

Some plants recommended as fire-resistant — wildflowers such as broom groundsel (*Senecio spartioides*), Britton's skullcap (*Scutellaria brittonii*) and Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*) — may be more difficult to find commercially.

Annual plants are not included on the list in the app, but are generally considered fire-resistant if kept well irrigated.

A photo of each plant is included, making the app highly visual. Key descriptive factors are also listed, including scientific and common name, and description of growth habits (height, time of bloom, flower color). Icons are utilized to indicate other key features ▶

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such as light requirements, deer-resistance, pollinator attractiveness, or if the plant performs well in rock gardens.

An app for everyone

The app has a diverse target audience, from home gardeners and governments to green industry professionals. Many home gardeners are concerned about wildfire risks and need advice on renovating their landscapes. Local governments provide advice to citizens in urban-rural boundaries or forested areas. Nursery professionals and retail garden centers can use the app as a quick pocket guide to answer customer questions.

Educational mobile apps are a new way to add value to existing nursery products. A QR (quick response) code that links to the download sites can be included on labels or signage. In this instance, the Fire-Resistant Plants app can be used to add value to plants without necessarily adding to the production cost. The large number of diverse plants included in the app may have the indirect effect of encouraging consumers to seek out and purchase other fire-resistant varieties.

Choosing fire-resistant landscape plants is just one of the keys to protecting structures from damage by wildfires. For a full explanation of the required components of a fire-resistant landscape, including mulch choices, creating defensible space and recommendations on specifics of irrigated zones, see the print publication *Fire-Resistant Plants for Oregon Home Landscapes PNW 590*, which is available as a free download through the OSU Extension Catalog (<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/pnw590>).

Note that the plants in this publication focus on those that thrive in central Oregon and mountainous areas of the Pacific Northwest. ☺

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SHRUBS & WOODY VINES ▲

Oregon Grape

Berberis (Mahonia) aquifolium

- Evergreen
- Winter interest
- Plant spreads by stolons
- Edible berries
- Grow more than one plant for good fruit production.



Height: 3–6' **USDA Hardiness Zone:** 5–8
Spread: 3–5' **Bloom:** March–May
Flowers: Yellow



GROUNDCOVERS ▲

Geranium

Geranium spp.

- Long flowering
- Drought tolerant
- Needs good drainage
- Can have a spreading growth form
- Water thoroughly and let soil go dry between watering.



Height: 4"–4' **USDA Hardiness Zone:** 4–9
Spread: Varies by species **Bloom:** May–August
Flowers: White, pink, purple, blue



PERENNIALS ▲

Britton's Skullcap

Scutellaria brittonii

- Small wildflower, native to plains, foothills, and mountainous regions



Height: 4–8" **USDA Hardiness Zone:** 5–8
Spread: 4–8" **Bloom:** May–July
Flowers: Blue



TREES ▲

Eastern Hop Hornbeam or Ironwood

Ostrya virginiana

- Deciduous shade tree
- Catkins give winter interest
- Slow growing
- Fruit clusters look hop-like
- Tolerates drought and clay soil



Height: 25–40' **USDA Hardiness Zone:** 3–9
Spread: 20–30' **Bloom:** April
Flowers: Greenish, reddish-brown



Screenshots from *Fire-Resistant Landscape Plants for the Willamette Valley*, the mobile application developed by OSU Extension. The app has a variety of plants listed, including shrubs, woody vines, ground covers, perennials and trees.