# changing seasons

*More than houses need rebuilding after disaster strikes*

**by Bruce Giffin**

When people from other climates say we don't have seasons, I say we do—they're just subtle. Certainly, winter in California is one of our best seasons, our time of annual rains and green hills, succulent aloes and pyracanthas blooming red in gardens, orange groves in valleys surrounded by steep mountains that are sometimes dusted with snow. It's the season of the California dream, one that returns year after year.

The dream has another side to it though, a season that returns nearly as often, and that is the rhythmic beat of fire, flood, mudslides and quakes. In looking at a hundred years of headlines, the pattern emerges with startling regularity.

On June 27, 1990, a hot, ugly Santa Ana wind was blowing down San Marcos Pass. It had been sweltering all day and as the sun edged over towards the horizon, instead of cooling off, the air became a blast furnace. At 6 p.m., as I put my six month-old son in a backpack to walk along the beach, it was 105 degrees. A small plume of smoke curling up into the sky from near the top of the pass caught my eye. By the time we reached the foot of Stearns Wharf, the plume had turned into a black, brown and red tornado that covered the sky of our town. Ash began raining down, ash that tasted of chaparral and the dust of wildlife mixed with the contents and structure of 614 homes—ash that held incinerated hopes, dreams and memories. For those who saw up close the ferocity of the firestorm—and how it jumped six lanes of the freeway in a heartbeat—it was a vision from hell, with fireballs the size of houses being hurled a quarter mile by a demonic pitcher.

Over the next several days a resource center for fire survivors sprang up. Members of the Santa Barbara Contractors Association manned one of the tables for days on end, responding to various requests from fire survivors that ranged from finding an excavating contractor (to bury 17 dead horses) to providing ad hoc information on building costs and how to take the first steps towards re-building. Mostly though, we listened. We listened to people who showed up with literally nothing but the clothes on their backs. We listened to stories of close calls and tragic losses. And then we watched as shock slowly wore off and resolve set in.

Rental housing had to be found, clothes purchased, rubble sorted through for mementoes, insurance companies dealt with and education obtained about the process of rebuilding. The first step was the clean up. What had once been a home was now a pile of ash 12 to 18 inches tall. The fire was so intense that even the foundations of the existing homes could not be saved as the intense heat had turned the sand in the concrete to glass. Then came the challenge of figuring out what to re-build: the same building footprint or something new and different? What was covered by insurance and what was not? Interviewing architects, builders and interior designers, and trying to make sense of a cumbersome permitting process even to re-build was daunting. For some it was overwhelming and they simply decided to sell their now bare lot. Most decided to tough it out and re-build. Four months later the first home began construction and over the next two and a half years the neighborhoods came back to life.

Thirteen years later, there is no evidence of the incredible events that swept through our town in one evening. The new homes, by and large, are bigger and nicer. They are built to higher standards and stricter fire codes. It's a valiant effort, and the new standards will help houses to be more fire resistant—but for those homes that are the matchsticks in front of the blow torch of a firestorm, it won't really matter what they're made out of.

When the Santa Ana winds blow, the fire happens so fast there is no time to rationally save things and get out. There is a warning though. Like a hurricane, the winds that produce major firestorms are identifiable weather phenomena. They are typically caused by a combination of a strong high pressure system parked over Utah combined with a low pressure system over Baja California. The two combine to create hot, dry, easterly winds that funnel through our mountains and canyons.

The day before the Painted Cave fire, everyone in town was commenting that it was "perfect fire weather." For those astute enough to see it, that first day is the warning call. If you live in fire country and it is perfect fire weather and the wind is blowing, consider going ahead and evacuating your horses and pets, packing up your photo albums, documents and computer hard drive into your car. Arrange a meeting place for your family along the coast and designate a contact person outside the area. Be ready to go on a moment's notice. Perhaps the wind will die down, the heat will abate and the fire won't happen and your efforts will not be required after all. And if not this time, then perhaps another as fire, flood, mudslides and quakes are a definite part of our California seasons.

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