

*“You’re only as safe as your neighbors. And your neighbors are only safe if you’ve made your property fire-defensible.”*

LAURA TIETZ, founder of nonprofit Fire Free Fitch

## FITCH: Recent rains create good conditions for removing plant

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As the ground dries, probably by the end of May, it will be a lot tougher to remove the broom brush invader, which replaces native plants and also climbs trees.

Tietz acknowledges that the Scotch broom is pretty, with its golden petals that sometimes turn dark red.

But appearances can be deceptive.

Broom species are of particular concern because they combust readily, burn intensely and are widespread, according to Healdsburg Fire Chief Randy Collins.

He said the species also is a problem because it's common along roads, threatening the routes used by firefighters to access fires and by the public to evacuate.

But the good news is that the recent rains have helped.

“The moist soil caused by these late rains creates the ide-

al conditions to remove broom and other invasive species by the roots and minimizes the likelihood of it returning later,” he said in an e-mail.

Tietz said Scotch broom is hardy, with seeds that can stay alive up to 80 years in the soil.

Her group also is encouraging residents to order reflective signs with their house numbers to make it easier for emergency responders to locate their property in case of fire.

She also has pushed residents to create defensible space around their homes by removing low-hanging tree branches, to keep fire from traveling into the tree canopy.

Other tips include clearing roofs of debris, cutting branches that hang over buildings, and mowing dry grass and weeds at least 100 feet from residences.

“You’re only as safe as your neighbors. And your neighbors

are only safe if you’ve made your property fire-defensible,” Tietz said.

For her efforts, Tietz was honored last year by the City of Healdsburg for her contributions to reducing the danger of wildland fire on Fitch Mountain and increasing the public's awareness of fire danger.

Her group makes wood chip-pers available for free for up to three hours as an incentive for people to clear their land of problem vegetation.

“We’re not telling people to scalp their land, but use more fire-resistant native plants,” she said.

Standing outside her home with a commanding view of Healdsburg stretched out below, Tietz noted that when she bought her three-acre property several years ago, she couldn't see other houses.

Now that her neighbors have cleared fire-prone bushes and trees, she said, “I can see my

neighbors. In a way, it feels good. People are changing their attitude toward what makes a good view.”

Since forming Fire Free Fitch in 2008, Tietz has helped mobilize 21 neighborhoods on the mountain to address fire-hazardous vegetation.

But she said there are still about 500 more homes that need to be reached, especially on South Fitch Mountain. There are challenges because many are rental properties with owners who live outside Sonoma County. A lot of the structures are close together and located on steep, narrow one-lane roads where fighting a fire is tough.

“We will slowly work our way around the mountain — however long it takes,” she said.

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# Fighting fire risk

## Group helps residents target invasive, flammable plant

By **CLARK MASON**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

**F**itch Mountain in Healdsburg hasn't experienced a major fire since 1945, when a blaze destroyed almost a dozen homes.

But the densely vegetated mountain, dotted with houses and old summer cabins along narrow, winding roads, is seen as highly vulnerable to wildland fire and periodically experiences close calls.

With fire season a few months away, a community group is focusing on a formidable nemesis — the invasive weed Scotch broom and several other related species that proliferate there.

Residents are being urged to remove the nonnative species and fire hazard while the ground is still wet and the plant is more easily uprooted.

To remove a shrub effectively without spreading thousands of seeds, "it has to be done at a particular time of year and in a certain way," said Laura Tietz, the energetic octogenarian who has contacted about 300 households on Fitch Mountain to spread the gospel of fire prevention.



**THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB:** Marc Mager uses a "weed wrench" to pull out Scotch broom plants on his Fitch Mountain property on Tuesday. The group Fire Free Fitch makes the tool available to residents who want to eradicate the shrub and help prevent fires this summer.

Her nonprofit group, Fire Free Fitch, is making available to residents a "weed wrench" that clamps onto the base of the plants and can extricate them in one fell swoop, roots and all.

"They're really easy to pull out," said Marc Mager, a 25-year resident

of Fitch Mountain, as he demonstrated the tool while clearing his one-acre parcel.

Mager, a retired school principal, has also targeted juniper, or what the fire marshal calls the "gasoline plant," for its tendency to ignite.

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## FITCH MOUNTAIN CAMPAIGN



**PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE:** Laura Tietz of the nonprofit group Fire Free Fitch is a moving force in a push to eradicate Scotch broom from Fitch Mountain. The flammable shrub dots the hillsides of rural Sonoma County, and is a particular threat in the hilly neighborhoods east of Healdsburg. Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat