Protect your home against bush fires

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ONCE again this year bush fires have swept through Australia, leaving in their wake a trail of loss and destruction; once again rural dwellers are courageously setting about the task of rehabilitating their properties and rebuilding their homes. Letters received by the Building Research Liaison Service have asked what special precautions can be taken to protect a house against bush fire, and in this article an attempt is made to answer the question.

A study by the Division of Forests Products, C.S.I.R.O., of the houses destroyed in the disastrous Beaumaris fire in January, 1944, revealed that the greatest hazard to guard against is the entrance of sparks and flying embers through openings, such as eaves, ventilators, open windows, and the space under the house. Where this occurred, the fire started inside the house, which was speedily destroyed, regardless of the material of its external walls. Brick and stone houses fared no better than timber houses.

The problem facing the home builder is to protect himself against this hazard, while still retaining the living comfort derived from adequate ventilation, and while still providing access under the house for regular inspection against termite attack.

The following represent the modifications to normal building practice which are recommended in order to reconcile these apparently conflicting requirements:

Timber houses, and, in fact, all houses supported on stumps, should be close-boarded below floor level. Adequate under-floor ventilation should be provided by woven wire vents, and an access door should be provided.

All wall ventilators should be of the woven wire type or else they should be covered by a fine wire mesh. Large ventilators in gable ends should be eliminated and replaced by a number of scattered small ventilators with fine mesh openings.

Eaves may be open for maximum ventilation, but the openings should be covered with ⅛ in. wire netting.

Badly fitting Marseilles pattern tiles should be avoided. Close-fitting sheet roofing is preferable, and the joints should be sealed.

The spaces under corrugations of sheet roofing at eaves, ridges, hips and valleys should be covered with fine mesh wire netting.

Fly-wire protection should be given to all door and window openings.

In addition to the above, the following rather obvious precautions must be taken: Keep trees and shrubs clear of the walls, and stacks of fuel well clear of the building or stored in properly constructed sheds.

Consideration should also be given to the use of a non-combustible material, such as bricks (where available), concrete blocks, or earth wall construction for the walls. The last-mentioned material has long been used successfully for houses and farm buildings in many country areas, and where the right type of soil is readily accessible, and self-help labour is available, it can be a very economical form of construction.

(Compiled by the Building Research Liaison Service P.O. Box 2807AA, Melbourne, to which enquiries for further information on this subject may be addressed.)