

Crape Myrtles – Tips for Care and Pruning

Crape murder . . . rape of the crapes. . . butchering—call it what you like, but there are serial homicidal pruners of crape myrtles out there, and the trend continues despite the best efforts of horticulturists across the south. Standard crape myrtles have the potential to be wonderful small trees, if they aren't chopped to their knees annually!

Crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia sps*) are a true southern favorite. Native to China and Korea the plant is grown from zones 6 to 10—in the more northern ranges it tends to die back to the ground annually. Few plants can compete with this vibrant flowering plant for summer color, given freely with very little care.

They thrive in heat and humidity and are drought tolerant to boot, so are a common landscape plant in the southern landscape. Thousands of varieties are available, and the plants mature height run the gamut, from almost groundcover forms, to dwarfs, miniatures, up to standards. New cultivars appear annually. Knowing what mature height you are seeking BEFORE planting, can help in choosing the variety you buy. If space is limited, opt for one of the smaller growing forms, which can be sheared back annually. If you have chosen a standard variety, let it mature and become the statuesque beauty it was bred to be!

Crape myrtle trees bloom on the new growth, so any pruning that is needed should be done prior to new growth beginning—for most of the south, this will be from mid February

through mid March. Crape myrtles are often one of the last plants to begin growing in the garden, waiting on warmer temperatures; so don't worry if February is slipping away on you. While some gardeners begin pruning in the fall after the leaves have fallen, avoid this for two reasons. One, you have a pruned look all winter long, which is less natural looking and less appealing in the landscape; and secondly, if you live in the upper south, extra growth is an added buffer for any potential winter damage, which can then be pruned off in February. Well-established and well-structured plants may not need annual pruning. Doing a good job of pruning while the trees are young, will build in the structure and form you need, and require less care when the trees are older.

For most standard crape myrtles, choose three, five or seven main trunks. Odd numbers give you a more desirable mature form than even—which often line up like soldiers in formation. My preference is to choose three or five. You don't want too many canes or eventually things are going to get pretty crowded as the canes (trunks) mature. Choose canes that have ample space to grow and are growing as straight and strong as possible. Prune out any additional canes or suckers as close to the soil line as possible. Suckering is one common complaint of crape myrtle growers, and again, depending on variety, may be a fact of life. Cut the suckers off as they appear. If allowed to grow-- they will, and soon you will have a mess of trunks. These suckers do compete for nutrients, water and sunlight, so remove them. Don't use herbicides to keep them controlled; they are attached to the

mother plant in most cases, and weed killers could do damage to your plant.

Normally branching should begin six to eight feet off the ground. This can be lower if the plants are in a flower bed and you don't need to walk under them or view oncoming traffic at roadside. Again, we want the upper branches to spread in different directions. Make pruning cuts slightly above a bud that is facing the direction you want your new branch to grow. Avoid limbs which cross back through the plant or rub against each other. Wind movement and growth can cause these branches to wound each other, and you will eventually lose one or both.

Prune to stronger canes—remove any growth smaller than a pencil in diameter. Leaving wood that small will result in weak new growth which will have a difficult time supporting any flowers. Open the plant up by removing excess branches on the interior of the plant. This will allow better air circulation and sunlight penetration and can reduce disease problems. One of the biggest problems with crape myrtles can be the disease called powdery mildew. Many of the newer cultivars are resistant to this disease, but if you have a variety that is susceptible, keeping the plant more open in the center can cut down on disease problems.

Correct pruning will create a graceful tree-formed plant. The plant should begin flowering earlier, and have more flowers that are held upright on their branches. Allowing too many canes or cutting the plants back too short will leave you with a bushy shrub which is later in blooming. Powdery mildew is always more of an

issue with less all the densely packed foliage. Keeping them sheared also prevents the trunks from maturing. Many varieties have outstanding peeling and colored bark when mature. Ranging in shades of tans and grays to copper or cinnamon, larger trunks begin to shed outer bark exposing the beautiful shades beneath. This “coming of age’ for your crape myrtles can give as much color and interest in the winter landscape as the flowers do in the summer. Sheared plants are never allowed to show this interest.

Luckily for crape myrtles, the plants are resilient, and can tolerate the annual topping or shearing that some folks insist on giving. For those who have finally come around to the correct way to prune, reversing the damage done from years of shearing and large knobby growths will take time, but eventually the damage can be corrected.

If you are starting from scratch with a new standard crape myrtle, choose a bright, sunny location for your new plant, and begin pruning in February. If left unpruned, the plant may resemble a telephone pole, all tall upright growth. Once you have the structure in place—arching branches, spreading in different directions, your job is almost complete. As with any plant, occasional maintenance is needed.

Why do so many gardeners prune their crape myrtles annually back to those ugly three-to-four-foot nubs (aka butchering)?

Actually, there are various reasons.

A - *They have always pruned that way, so why change now?*

Change can be a good thing!

B. *My mother (friend, neighbor, etc) does it this way, so I should too.* When one person does it, people see it and think that is the correct way, so they do it too. But in this one instance, mama isn't right!

C. - *Severe pruning leads to larger flowers.* While this is true, there are problems with this theory too. Severe pruning encourages rapid new growth. This new growth does produce large flower heads. Unfortunately, the new growth is so long and weak that it gets top-heavy and can't support the weight of the flowers, so we get weeping crape myrtles—sometimes with branches actually snapping off under their weight. If you have ever tried to pull out of a driveway or parking lot near one of these plants, visibility is greatly reduced. Last but not least:

D - *I like it that way. I don't have room for it to get any taller.* Unfortunately, there is not much response to this one. Different strokes for different folks!