

Article of Interest

Proper Pruning of Crape Myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*)

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The commonly seen widely accepted practice of severely pruning crape myrtles ever year is sometimes called “crape murder” because that’s about what it amounts too. The motives for pruning crape myrtles annually are perhaps what cause them to be pruned so improperly. Crapes are most commonly pruned because people believe it promotes flowering, some prune in an effort to maintain a desired size, while many prune them just because its a widespread practice that they see others doing.

Pruning crape myrtles to encourage flowering is unnecessary. Crape myrtles flower on new wood, which is the current season’s growth. Pruning crape myrtles results in an abundance of new shoots that form flowers. Crape myrtle flowers form in clusters. The clusters on pruned crapes are larger than those on unpruned crapes, but the clusters are more numerous on unpruned crapes, so the overall floral effect is no different between pruned and unpruned crapes.

On some cultivars removing spent flower clusters, or deadheading, might encourage a second flush of blooms later in the summer. However this may not true for all cultivars and its only practical if the crape is of a size where the spent flowers can be reached.

Pruning crape myrtles is not the best way to maintain a desired height or shape. Crape myrtles grow in tree and shrub forms ranging from 3 feet to over 20 feet tall. There are dwarf varieties such as the razzle-dazzle series which grow 3-5 feet high, semi-dwarfs which grow between 5-10 feet such as Tonto, others such as Catawba grow 10-20 feet, and still others such as Natchez which grow over 20 feet tall. The best way to have a crape myrtle tree or shrub fit your landscape is to plant a variety which grows the desired size and is suitable for the spot where it’s planted.

Crape myrtles are a low maintenance ornamental plant as tough as they are beautiful. Some forms of pruning can improve their overall health and appearance if performed correctly. Whichever type of pruning is performed, when removing limbs or branches, always cut outside of the branch collar. The branch collar is bundled tissue at the base of a branch where the branch joins the main stem or where the branch joins a lateral. Also crape myrtles are best pruned in the late winter or early spring. Pruning in fall before the first frost can prevent dormancy.

Training crape myrtles into tree or shrub form. This type of pruning should be done when the tree is young. Taller varieties of crape myrtles can be trained as a single trunk as a multi-stem tree. Depending on personal preference select one, 3 or 5 main stems to train into leaders then remove all of the rest at ground level. Side

branches can be removed every year as the tree grows taller leaving 3 – 4 feet of trunk up to where the canopy begins. Regularly remove suckers from the base of the tree to retain only the main stems.

Dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties which grow to 10' tall or less can be trained into shrub form. Dwarf varieties can be maintained as compact shrubs by pruning the stems back to 6 inches above ground level every year before spring growth begins. Moderately prune semi-dwarf crape myrtles cutting out any growth thinner than the diameter of a pencil to form an intermediate size shrub.

Pruning crape myrtles to maintain natural form. Properly pruning crape myrtles will enhance its natural appearance and improve tree health. First of all dead and damaged branches should be removed and can be pruned off at any time of the year, however they might be easier to detect during the growing season when the tree is fully leafed out. Branches that cross or rub each other should be removed because they can cause wounds where diseases or insects can enter. Pruning out interior branches will open up the tree's canopy to let in light and improve air circulation. The angle formed where tree limbs branch is called a crotch angle and a good crotch angle is between 65° and 70°. Narrower crotch angles which form a "V" are weak and should be removed in younger trees. The remaining wider crotch angles will develop into a strong branching system as the tree matures. Quick growing shoots which form at the base of the tree are called suckers and they can drain the tree of needed resources and should be removed in early spring.



Pruning crape myrtles to enhance flower display.

Though it is not necessary to prune a crape to promote flowering, proper pruning will affect the flower display. Crape myrtle flowers should be distributed throughout the entire tree or shrub not just at the top. All terminal points or spurs along a branch can flower so they should not be removed. Dehorning is a commonly seen pruning technique where the tops of all the main stems are removed leaving nothing but the trunks with no lateral branches. Regularly dehorned stems lead to pollarding where the stems develop swollen knots at the tips. Pollarding creates weakened branches, reduces the crape's vigor and is unattractive.

In general prune crape myrtles in late winter or early spring during dormancy but before new spring growth has begun. Leave branch collars intact when making cuts. Properly made cuts should heal naturally making wax or other wound sealants unnecessary. Crape wood is very hard so use sharp tools.

Crape myrtles are beautiful woody ornamental plants, which are also hardy and low maintenance. They don't require pruning to flower, but can use proper pruning when necessary to promote good health and enhance appearance.

References:

“Crape Myrtle Culture”, UGA Cooperative Extension, leaflet 331. April 2001.

“Crape Myrtle Pruning”, Clemson University Cooperative Extension. January 1999.

“How to Prune Crape Myrtle” and “Proper Crape Myrtle Pruning”, Virginia cooperative Extension. 2000.

Pruning Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* spp.) <http://dallas.tamu.edu/woody/cmlyrtle/pruning.html>

Should I Prune my Crape Myrtles? http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston/t&s_3.htm