

Don't Commit Crape Murder



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BARTOW

This is the time of the year to prune crape myrtles -- but not murder them.

I often see large crape myrtles that have been planted in the wrong place. Most people don't realize that crape myrtle cultivars come in a wide range of sizes and flower colors. Retail garden centers often will not have the identity of the crape myrtle cultivar on the label. So, unsuspecting shoppers will buy one that has the potential to reach 40 feet and unknowingly plant it under utility wires or under the roof soffits. In a few years these plants are in need of serious pruning and there is the temptation is to get out the chain saw and whack the trunks off at 4 or 5 feet above the ground.

Once topping type pruning has been done, the tree will never again regain its original form unless it is cut to the ground and allowed to grow back. A profusion of small branches will emerge from the topped area resulting in a lack of proportion. The topping does stimulate the growth of larger blooms, but the stems are so spindly that the large blooms droop over with the heavy summer rains. Additionally, this pruning will have to be done every year and often at a lower level on the stem. If the plant is pruned at the same point each year, an unattractive knob will develop and pruning will have to be done below the old cut each year.

Crape myrtles have a natural shape. When planted in the right place, they require very little pruning. The only annual pruning required is to thin out the trunks and remove suckers, leaving three to seven permanent trunks. The trunks of some cultivars are very attractive. The more trunks you leave, the more attractive the tree is in winter. You also need to remove dead flowers and fruit structures lightly thin and remove dead and rubbing branches. The removal of seed pods in the winter has no effect on summer flowering. However, the removal of seed pods during the summer months does promote faster re-bloom.

If you have a crape myrtle tree in the wrong place, then it might be better to remove and replace it rather than cut the top off every year. There are several cultivars that reach a maximum of 8 to 10 feet and are resistant to powdery mildew. These cultivars include the Tonto, which has fuchsia blooms, Acoma, which has white blooms, Hopi, which has pink blooms, and Velma's Royal Delight, which has purple blooms. Visit the A-Z section of my Web site at <http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu> for a list of cultivars that grow in different shapes and sizes and reach heights from 5 to 40 feet.

Each summer, The Ledger has a crape myrtle sale at the end of July. The plants are inexpensive and are labeled with the name of the cultivar and its approximate growth habits. This sale provides an excellent opportunity for the general public to buy identified crape myrtle cultivars for new plantings and also as replacements for those planted in the wrong place. The Polk County Master Gardeners usually attend this sale and distribute literature on the proper selection, planting and management of crape myrtles. Have a good gardening day.

Contributed by David Shibles, University of Florida/IFAS Extension

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