

# CRAPE MYRTLES: FOUR SEASONS OF BEAUTY



"I have often thought that if heaven had given me choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden. Such a variety of subjects, some one always coming to perfection, the failure of one thing repaired by the success of another, and instead of one harvest a continued one through the year. Under a total want of demand except for our family table, I am still devoted to the garden. But though an old man, I am but a young gardener."

Thomas Jefferson to Charles Willson Peale  
Poplar Forest, August 20, 1811

# CRAPE MYRTLE SELECTION

First select the right size and shape of crape myrtle for your location. Plan for the tree's full size at maturity, rather than relying on severe pruning to keep it within bounds. This will ensure a graceful silhouette all year round. Select named and labeled varieties from a reliable nursery to be certain of the plant's final size and to ensure healthy stock.

## Characteristics of Crape Myrtle Varieties

<u>NAME OF CULTIVAR</u>	<u>APPROX. HEIGHT IN FEET AT MATURITY</u>	<u>GROWTH HABIT</u>	<u>FLOWER COLOR</u>	<u>MILDEW RESISTANCE</u>	<u>FALL LEAF COLOR</u>	<u>EXFOLIATING BARK</u>
Centennial	2 - 3	Dwarf, round shrub	Bright Purple	Good	Orange	No, Smooth
Chickasaw	2 - 3	Miniature	Pink - Lavender	High	N / A	N / A
Pocomoke	2 - 3	Miniature Weeping	Red	Good	N / A	N / A
Tightwad Red	2 - 4	Dwarf	Light Red	High	N / A	N / A
Velma's Royal Delight	2 - 4	Compact	Purple	Good	Yellow orange	Average
Victor	3 - 5	Upright Dwarf	Deep Red	Good	Yellow	No, Smooth
Acoma	6 - 10	Low, spreading, arching	White	High	Purple red	Great
Hopi	8 - 10	Low, spreading	Medium Pink	High	Orange red	Great
Pecos	8 - 10	Low globose	Medium Pink	High	Maroon	Good
Prairie Lace	8 - 10	Upright, semi dwarf shrub	Medium Pink edged in White	Fair	Red to Red Orange	No, Smooth
Centennial Spirit	8 - 12	Upright	Dark Red	Good	Red orange	Average
Tonto	8 - 12	Compact globose	Red	High	Bright maroon	Good
Zuni	9 - 12	Globose	Medium Lavender	High	Red orange	Good
Regal Red	10 - 12	Upright, rounded tree to 12' wide	Deep Red	Good	Red orange	No, Smooth
Yvonne	10 - 15	Compact globose	Pink - Lavender	Good	N / A	N / A
Catawba	12 - 15	Upright	Violet Purple	Good	Red orange	Average
Conestoga	12 - 15	Open arching	Pale Lavender	Good	Yellow	Average
Sioux	12 - 15	Upright	Vibrant Pink	High	Maroon	Good
William Toovey, aka Watermelon Red	12 - 15	Vase-shaped small tree	Watermelon Red	Good	Red orange	No, Smooth
Byers Wonderful White	15 - 20	Upright small tree	White	Good	Yellow	No, Smooth
Choctaw	15 - 20	Small tree	Bright Pink	High	Maroon	Great
Comanche	15 - 20	Broad crown	Coral Pink	High	Orange red	Great
Lipan	15 - 20	Broad upright	Medium Lavender	High	Orange	Best
Near East	15 - 20	Open spreading	Light Pink	Moderate	Yellow orange	Average
Osage	15 - 20	Arching, open	Clear Pink	High	Red	Great
Potomac	15 - 20	Upright Small Tree	Clear Pink	High	Orange	No, Smooth
Raspberry Sundae	15 - 20	Upright	Cardinal red to pink	Good	Orange red	Average
Seminole	15 - 20	Compact globose	Medium Pink	Good	Yellow	Average
Yuma	15 - 20	Broad upright	Medium Lavender	Good	Yellow orange	Good
Tuskegee	15 - 25	Broad spreading	Dark Pink	High	Red orange	Great
Dynamite	20 - 25	Upright	Red	Good	N / A	Average
Tuscarora	20 -25	Broad vase	Dark Pink	High	Red orange	Great

# Characteristics of Crape Myrtle Varieties, Cont.

<u>NAME OF CULTIVAR</u>	<u>APPROX. HEIGHT IN FEET AT MATURITY</u>	<u>GROWTH HABIT</u>	<u>FLOWER COLOR</u>	<u>MILDEW RESISTANCE</u>	<u>FALL LEAF COLOR</u>	<u>EXFOLIATING BARK</u>
Natchez	20 - 30	Broad tall tree	White	High	Red orange	Great
Carolina Beauty	20+	Very upright	Park Red	Poor	Orange	Average
Dallas Red	20 +	Broad upright	Red	High	N / A	N / A
Miami	20 +	Upright	Dark Pink	High	Orange	Great
Red Rocket	20 +	Upright	Cherry Red	High	N / A	Average
Basham's Party Pink	25 +	Broad tall tree	Light Lavender	Good	Orange red	Good
Muskogee	25 +	Broad tall tree	Light Lavender	High	Red / Orange	Good
Biloxi	30 +	Upright vase	Pale Pink	High	Orange red	Great

List compiled from [Southern Living Garden Book](#); Fanick's Garden Center in San Antonio, TX; University of Georgia website; Auburn University website.

## CARE OF CRAPE MYRTLES

Crape myrtles are one of the Southeast's most beautiful small trees and were introduced into the United States in 1747 from China, Korea, and later on from Japan.

Their excellent drought resistance, fast growth, beautiful flowers, and low maintenance requirements make them very popular. Many cultivars have superb bark interest and great fall leaf color as well. About their only drawbacks are a tendency to grow suckers at the base that need removing on tree-shaped cultivars, and a tendency for some cultivars to be susceptible to mildew.

**LOCATION:** They are hardy in Zones 7-9, and ideal for Spartanburg. Crape myrtles prefer a hot climate and need full sun to bloom. Select a southern or western exposure whenever possible, for best flowering and to reduce problems with powdery mildew.

**PLANTING:** Able to survive in almost any type of soil, crape myrtles do best in well-drained locations. For clay soils mix in pea gravel or very finely ground pine bark to improve drainage. Place the tree into a hole dug twice as wide as the root ball, with the top of the root collar (the part where the trunk flares out into the root system) level with, or 1-2" above, ground level. Best times to plant are Fall and early Spring, with Fall being preferred, as the roots will continue to grow during the warmer parts of the dormant seasons.

**WATERING:** For the first season, a newly planted tree from a 5 gallon container needs 10 gallons of water per week, if there is no rain, and preferably delivered in 2 applications of 5 gallons each. Larger transplants would need more. Water as needed during droughts. Crape myrtles are very drought resistant once established.

**FERTILIZING:** Apply a slow release fertilizer with a 3-1-1 ratio of nitrogen to phosphorous and potassium. Examples include a 12-4-4 or 18-6-6 fertilizer, applied in late Winter or early Spring as leaves emerge, and again in July. For a 6-10' tall crape myrtle, 2-3 cups of an 18-6-6 should be applied uniformly beneath the canopy. For a 15-25' tall tree, 1-2 quarts of fertilizer should be used. Do not fertilize after Labor Day. Note that excessive nitrogen (runoff from turf fertilizers) can delay flowering and reduce cold hardiness. (ANSI A-300 and International Society of Arboriculture.)

**MULCHING:** A 2-4" deep (maximum) layer of pine bark or hardwood mulch or pine needles around the tree base, spread all the way out to the edge of the tree canopy (the dripline), helps control weeds and conserve moisture. Leave a 4" open space on all sides of the trunks, to avoid stressing stem tissues. Avoid 8-10" tall mulch "volcanoes", which can provide housing for rodents, cause root rot, and cause adventitious roots (out-of-place roots that grow into the mulch rather than into the ground).

# PRUNING OF CRAPE MYRTLES

## “DO’S”

The thoughtful gardener or landscaper strives to provide welcoming beauty and architectural elegance year-round in outdoor living spaces, and proper pruning techniques help achieve these goals.

For crape myrtles, pruning should be minimal, to remove basal suckers and damaged or crossed limbs. The natural round shrub or tree-form shape provides the best silhouette all year, promotes the healthiest growth of the plant, and costs the least amount of time and money to maintain.

- **DO** prune when the tree is dormant, just before bud break, in the late Winter or early Spring, but only if the sap is not frozen. Best time to prune is January through April. Pruning between August and December has been shown to significantly reduce the cold hardiness of crape myrtles, increasing the risk of killing the tree during winter. (C. Haynes, PhD., 1991 Hort Science 26:1381-1383).
- **DO** remove broken, dead and crossed limbs. Remove suckers at the base of the tree and at the trunk.
- **DO** limb up the tree, by pruning off the side branches, if a tree form is desired, instead of a rounded shrubby shape. Try to do this before limbs get bigger around than a pencil, to avoid leaving a scar. Small cuts do less damage to the tree than large cuts, and heal more quickly as well.
- **DO** limit pruning to no more than 25% of the live branches in a single year. If necessary, prune neglected plants over a period of years to obtain the desired appearance.
- **DO** know that excessive pruning does not induce heavier flowering, but rather reduces it, due to the removal of significant plant carbon and nutrient reserves. (Texas A&M University, <http://dallas.tamu.edu/woody/cmirtle/pruning.html>) Do encourage repeat flowering (if desired, and if you can reach!) on cultivars that bloom in May/June, by removing seed heads just as they are forming. Leave the late summer seed heads from all varieties to fall naturally, as pruning these in late Summer or Fall reduces cold hardiness.
- **DO** refrain from pruning if in doubt. Under-pruning is easy to correct; over-pruning causes permanent damage.

### TREE FORM: Beautiful year-round architectural silhouettes



# PRUNING OF CRAPE MYRTLES

## “DONT’S”

- **DON'T** “top” the tree or “round over” the shrub by sawing off all the branches except the main trunks. Topping is perhaps the most harmful pruning practice known, according to the International Society of Arboriculture. Topping can cause immediate dieback and/or the growth of a “broom” or “pom pom”, which are long thin shoots that are grown from just under the bark. These are poorly attached and easily broken off, and a very dense “broom” can cause the tree to topple in high winds. Additionally, topping lowers the life expectancy of a tree by at least one-third and destroys its beauty. (Pruning Techniques, 1991, Brooklyn Botanic Garden Record, p.15 and “Why Topping Hurts Trees”, Int'l Society of Arboriculture's website - <http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/topping.asp>)
- **DON'T** “pollard” the crape myrtle. This pruning method, along with “topping”, is called “Crape Murder” by Steve Bender, *Southern Living* magazine's senior garden writer. Pollarding involves cutting off all the previous year's branches to a “knuckle” or “knob” at or close to the main trunks. This type of pruning produces similar stresses to that of “topping”, including a shorter life span and an ugly tree silhouette before leaf-out. Some Southern cities, such as Charlotte, NC, have ordinances against this type of pruning because it costs extra money for “unnecessary” pruning, it makes the tree unattractive while dormant, and it costs money to replace the trees more frequently. It is better to purchase appropriately-sized cultivars to begin with or to relocate a tree if it gets too large for the site. (Crape myrtles are very resilient and tough, and are fairly easy to move.)

### RENOVATING A POORLY PRUNED CRAPE MYRTLE:

- a) Let a “murdered” tree with large diameter trunks (1" caliper or more) grow out for a season, and in early the following Spring, select one, two or possibly three dominant branches per trunk to grow out over time. Prune off smaller side branches, taking out no more than 25% of the live branches in a single year. You may need to prune side branches over several years to allow the tree form to develop and to allow evidence of the big cuts to grow over.
- b) Smaller-trunked trees that need corrective pruning can be cut flush with the ground in early Spring, and an odd number of trunks (3, 5 or 7) allowed to regrow in the natural tree form.

## “CRAPE MURDER”: 6 Months of Ugly



Topping or  
Hat Racking



Pollarding



## Resources used to develop this brochure include:

The American Horticultural Society Encyclopedia of Garden Plants, Christopher Brickell, editor. ©1989, revised 1992.  
Auburn University, <http://www.ag.auburn.edu/dept/hf/landscape/crapemyrtle2.htm>  
Clemson University, <http://hgig.clemson.edu>  
Bruce Fraedrich, PHD, Bartlett Tree Research Labs  
International Society of Arboriculture, [www.treesaregood.com](http://www.treesaregood.com), consumer website.  
Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, Michael A. Dirr, ©1975, revised 1998.  
Month-By-Month Gardening in the South, Don Hastings and Chris Hastings, ©1996.  
Pruning Techniques, Brooklyn Botanic Garden Record, ©1991.  
Pruning Trees, Shrubs & Vines, Brooklyn Botanic Garden Record, ©2003.  
South Carolina's Garden Guide, Jim Wilson, ©1997.  
The Southern Living Garden Book, Steve Bender, editor, 1998.  
Texas A&M University, <http://dallas.tamu.edu/woody/cmyrtle>  
Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, annotated by Edwin Morris Betts, ©1944, reprinted 1981.  
Time-Tested Plants: Thirty Years in a Four Season Garden, Pamela J. Harper, ©2000.  
University of Georgia, <http://www.ces.uga.edu/pubcd/L331.htm>

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# Tree Topping Hurts!

Topping is severely cutting limbs larger than 3" in diameter to stubs within the tree's crown so as to remove the normal canopy and disfigure the tree.

## Reasons not to top:

■ **Starvation** Good pruning practices rarely remove more than 1/2 to 1/3 of the crown, which in turn does not seriously interfere with the ability of a tree's leafy crown to manufacture food. Topping removes so much of the crown that it upsets an older tree's well-developed crown-to-root ratio and temporarily cuts off its food-making ability.

■ **Shock** A tree's crown is like an umbrella that shields much of the tree from the direct rays of the sun. By suddenly removing this protection, the remaining bark tissue is so exposed that scalding may result. There may also be a dramatic effect on neighboring trees and shrubs. If these thrive in shade and the shade is removed, poor health or death may result.

■ **Ugliness** A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with its regrowth it never regains the grace and character of its species. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset.

■ **Rapid new growth** The goal of topping is usually to control the height and spread of a tree. Actually, it has just the opposite effect. The resulting sprouts (often called water sprouts) are far more numerous than normal new growth and they elongate so rapidly that the tree returns to its original height in a very short time — and with a far denser crown.

■ **Insects and disease** The large stubs of a topped tree have a difficult time forming callus. The terminal location of these cuts, as well as their large diameter, prevent the tree's chemically based natural defense system from doing its job. The stubs are highly vulnerable to insect invasion and the spores of decay fungi. If decay is already present in the limb, opening the limb will speed the spread of the disease.

■ **Cost** To a worker with a saw, topping a tree is much easier than applying the skill and judgement of good pruning. Therefore, topping may cost less in the short run. However, the true costs of topping are hidden. These include: reduced property value, the expense of removal and replacement if the tree dies, the loss of other trees and shrubs if they succumb to changed light conditions, the risk of liability from weakened branches, and increased future maintenance.

■ **Weak limbs** At best, the wood of a new limb that sprouts after a larger limb is cut is more weakly attached than a limb that develops more normally. If rot exists or develops at the severed end of the limb, the weight of the sprout makes a bad situation even worse.

■ **Tree death** Some older trees are more tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily after severe pruning and the reduced foliage most surely will lead to death of the tree.



## Alternatives to topping

- Start out right by planting trees that will fit your available space when they reach maturity
- Prune properly and regularly. A light pruning every three years will keep your tree in healthy condition.
- Crown reduction, making the tree canopy smaller using proper pruning techniques, can be performed by a certified arborist.

For more information, contact

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