

Stop Crape Murder!

One of Florida's most popular and beautiful flowering trees is the Crape Myrtle; (*Lagerstroemia indica*) The Crape Myrtle comes in a lovely assortment of colors, including white, pink, lavender and red. It is a hardy and adaptable tree that prefers a sunny location with good drainage.

There are many different types; and can be purchased in sizes ranging from twenty feet in height to a miniature size when mature. In order to determine what you are purchasing when you go to the nursery, read the labels and ask questions.

Severe Pruning and its Consequences:

The time to prune these beauties is in LATE WINTER. Pruning should create a canopy in which air can circulate and *all* branches are able to receive sunlight. Old habits and past practices persist. European gardening techniques utilize heavy pruning and shaping called "pollarding" or "espalier". These techniques have been used in the hope of creating more blooms from the newly sprouted growth of the flush of growth just below the stubbed branch or trunk. Many people falsely believe by hard pruning back the branches of the small tree they will create a more abundant flowering tree. In fact the result is the plant must undergo a complete recovery and produce new branches prior to any actual bud (then flower) production. Further, the result of new stem productions requires significant amounts of nutrients resulting in less available nutrients to create new flowers. Over pruning results in an unattractive and damaged plant in terms of long term return on investment. See below for examples of over pruning a.k.a. "Crape Murder".



The "Flat Top"



The "Wild Thing" (note the decay in the trunk wood)

Crape myrtles can be rehabilitated with two methods:

One is to choose the strongest two or three sprouts from each stub and remove all others. This encourages the remaining sprouts to be stronger and the canopy to be more arid. It will take two or more seasons of this care to improve the appearance of the tree and its health.

The second method is severe; it involves cutting the tree back to one or two inches from the ground during the trees dormant state. After two or three weeks of growth, choose three to five of the most vigorous new shoots on each trunk and remove the rest. New shoots that appear need to be removed. Within three to five years, the tree will have its natural appearance once again.

The following techniques should be used to properly prune crape myrtles:

- Remove suckers from the bottom of the plant
- Remove damaged, crossed or branches that look diseased. If removing crossed branches, remove the weaker of the two that are crossing or rubbing
- Prune the tips of the branches to remove old flowers or blooms to encourage possible second blooming
- Thin out small twiggy growth to allow air circulation within the canopy



A well formed crape myrtle (picture courtesy www.crapemyrtle farms.com)

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