

Pruning of Crape Myrtles

Crape myrtle cultivars are available in a plentitude of colors, with sizes ranging from a few feet tall to 25 feet. They're beautiful plants that unfortunately tend to suffer from the sharp end of a pair of loppers. But with proper pruning technique, gardeners can put an end to this "crapemurder" crime and enjoy their beautiful plants the way they're meant to be enjoyed.

Some previous practices of chopping off the tops of Crape Myrtles has become very commonplace. Many people believe that it is required to promote flowering. There are some isolated instances which heavy pruning is necessary because of improper planting location, but light pruning is all that is usually needed. The urge to chop your crape myrtle back severely can be satiated, but reserve this harsh treatment for the shrubby crape myrtles, not the trees. Severely cutting back the branches in February or March, much like you prune a hybrid tea rose, keeps the size manageable and produces plenty of new flowers.

Most pruning problems arise when an oversized plant is placed where there just isn't enough room. If a tree form is planted but there's only room in the garden for a bush, moving it makes more sense than annual, ritualistic pruning mutilation. So before getting out those loppers, study the branching habit of your crape myrtle to learn its natural growth form.

The results of heavy topping type pruning will be a profusion of small branches that 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.

A Crape Myrtle does not require heavy pruning to promote bloom. Flowers are produced on the new growth. They will produce flowers without any pruning, although they will produce larger flowers if at least lightly pruned. Pruning in late winter or early spring will stimulate new growth in the spring.

The natural look is preferable for crape myrtles because it allows the plant's sleek, beautiful bark to become a prominent feature of older, more established specimens. The bloom trusses on crape myrtles that are allowed to grow naturally are smaller than

the super-sized feather dusters of their stubbed-back brethren, but they fit more comfortably in the contemporary landscape.

Removal of all old seed heads is not necessary. This is recommended only if they are within reach. Once they become tall, mature plant, allow nature to take its course – the seeds will drop, the plant will bloom, and the natural grace of the plant has been retained.

A common question asked is why is all the bark falling or peeling off my Crape Myrtle? This is absolutely and totally a normal occurrence. Crape Myrtles have exfoliating bark. It peels off in long hunks, often exposing glossy, honey-color trunks. In all cases, the peeling bark is completely harmless.

When a Crape Myrtle is pruned properly, it will produce twice the number of blooms as it did during the previous year and the new branches will be strong enough to support the blooms.

This article has been produced with the information received from ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance, The Learning 2 Grow website, and Libby Hernandez at Sterling Management Services.



