

Prune like a Pro
Crape Myrtle
2022



TITLE: STOP CRAPE MURDER !

Description: Crape Myrtles (*Lagerstroemi indica*) are summer-blooming trees, producing flowers on new wood. The proper time to prune while dormant (late winter or early spring).

Objective(s): Learn how to prune a young Crape Myrtle tree to have a beautiful form, and realize that once beautifully shaped, it needs only minimal maintenance.

WHAT: One of the most popular – and most mistreated landscape plants -- is the Crape Myrtle. There are many cultivars, ranging from low shrubs to small trees. They have a range of flower colors, lustrous green leaves that change to bright fall colors, subtle to stunning multicolored bark, and unique winter architecture. Crape Myrtle is a great choice for four-season interest and appeal.

WHY: Proper pruning promotes good health and more blooms. CRAPE MURDER is actually tree topping -- and results in numerous vigorous shoots originating from the top of the cut stems. This ruins the natural form of the plant, which is especially obvious in winter after leaf drop. It creates numerous, large wounds which are susceptible to disease and insect damage. It stimulates quick growing, succulent shoots that are poorly attached and fewer, but larger blooms. The larger blooms are top heavy, and often break off in strong winds.

WHEN: The proper time to prune is late winter or early spring prior to new growth. Do not prune Crape Myrtles in late summer or early fall because new shoots that grow may freeze.

WHERE: The smaller the space available, the smaller the Crape Myrtle (at maturity) should be, so be sure to choose a cultivar that will not require pruning to make it “fit” into the landscape -- as this is a nearly impossible task. Choosing the right Crape Myrtle for your landscape requires evaluating where it will be planted, not just what color its flowers are. Will the plant be used in a perennial border or near a building foundation, or will it be a centerpiece specimen in a large grassy area or bed? Cultivars now range in size from dwarfs that can be grown in containers and hanging baskets, or used as shrubby ground covers, to shrub (up to about 15 feet) and tree forms (to 25 to 30 feet). This video deals with pruning the larger cultivars.

HOW: Your first decision is single-stem or multiple-stem. For single-stem, purchase a plant with just one stem. For a multi-stem plant, once it is established, select three to five evenly spaced stems and remove all others at ground level. As it grows, remove lower branches up to 4' - 5' above the ground. Start early in the life of the plant by regularly removing the 4 D's (dead, diseased, damaged, dysfunctional) to improve overall plant health and appearance. **Suckers** that develop around the base are dysfunctional and may be removed at any time of year.

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Do not top a Crape Myrtle; this is called “Crape Murder”.
- For single stem/trunk, purchase a plant that has only one stem.
- For multiple stem, choose 3-5 stems that will give the best form. Remove the others.
- Most of the dormant pruning cuts will be “thinning” cuts. Open up the middle for airflow and sunlight.
- A well- trained Crape Myrtle will not need yearly pruning (except for the 4 D’s)
- Suckers should be removed as soon as they appear, and can be done at any time.
- A “murdered” Crape Myrtle can be renovated, but it will be a multi-year process and it will never look as natural as one that has been properly pruned. Refer to University of Florida <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn-and-garden/crape-myrtle-pruning/> for renovation options.



Additional Resources / References:

Crape Myrtle Pruning, Clemson, <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/crape-myrtle-pruning/>

How to Prune Crape Myrtles, Piedmont Master Gardeners, (Virginia Tech/ VA State University)
<https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/article/how-to-prune-crape-myrtles/>

How Do You Prune a Crape Myrtle? Texas A&M (includes a video, FAQ, and more)
<https://agrillifeextension.tamu.edu/faqs/how-do-you-prune-a-crape-myrtle/>

Time to Prune Crape Myrtles NC Cooperative Extension, Wayne County
<https://wayne.ces.ncsu.edu/2016/02/time-to-prune-crape-myrtles/>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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