

Help! Crape Murder!

Now that winter is here, landscapers begin the annual ritual of pruning their trees, shrubs, and perennials. However, one tree that should NOT be pruned is our beloved crape myrtle. Contrary to popular beliefs, excessive pruning in crape myrtles does not induce heavier flowering, but rather detracts from having it due to the likely removal of significant plant carbon and nutrient (i.e. food) reserves. Plead with your contractors not to severely prune this tree. Misconceptions abound for the reasons that crepes are pruned, but none are true. Examples include:



- “My crape myrtle will not bloom if not pruned.” Crape myrtle bloom off new growth, but not necessarily off pruned trunks and limbs.
- “I need to maintain the shape” Crape myrtle has a natural shape that needs little if any training. Severely pruning ruins the structure and makes for unsightly trees in winter, hence the knuckles, which cause long-lasting structural problems. Winter reveals their exfoliating bark, which makes their naturally sculpted trunks look like living works of art.
- “My crape will get too tall.” If height is the issue, then there are crape myrtle varieties that will only reach certain heights in categories listed below. If you have to prune your crape to maintain certain height, you have the wrong tree in place. If you've already planted a crape myrtle that's overgrowing its boundary, you might want to move it. These trees may be transplanted easily, and only a small root ball is needed for success. It's best to move them in winter, when they're leafless and dormant.
- “I see this all over town, are most people wrongly heading back the crape myrtle”?

This is a copycat crime. Well-meaning people don't understand how these plants work, so they imitate what they have seen others do.

Another very common reason, according to crape myrtle grower David Byers, is trying to fit a tree-sized plant into a shrub-sized space. The key is to consider mature size when selecting a variety and harmful stump-cutting or pruning can be avoided. Pruning crape myrtles back to a convenient height below all limbs to force a large tree-type plant into a rotund lollipop look destroys the natural beauty of the tree and unnecessarily exposes the resulting growth to breakage from wind and ice. The pencil-sized stems often cannot support the weight of a full-size flower, especially when wet. Prune the seed heads in the winter if you so desire however, no limb should ever be pruned bigger than the size of a pencil.

Crape Myrtles - In Three Sizes

Large

- 'Centennial Spirit'--20 feet tall, dark red flowers
- 'Basham's Party Pink'—20 or more feet tall, lavender-pink flowers
- 'Natchez'--30 feet tall, white flowers
- 'Tuscarora'--23 feet tall, dark coral flowers
- 'Sioux'—10-20 feet tall, bright pink flowers

Medium

- 'Acoma'--10 to 14 feet tall, white flowers
- 'Sioux'--15 feet tall, bright pink flowers
- 'Yuma'--15 feet tall, lavender flowers
- 'Regal Red'--12 feet tall, deep red flowers
- 'Catawba'—10-12 feet tall, deep lavender
- 'Zuni'—5-10 feet tall, dark lavender

Small

- 'Centennial'--3 feet tall, bright purple flowers
- 'Chickasaw'--3 feet tall, pink flowers
- 'Victor'—3-4 feet tall, deep red flower
- 'Velma'—5 feet tall, purple flowers