



## Preventing “Crape Murder”

by Lisa Strange, FYN Community Association Coordinator

**C**rape myrtles generally require a minimum amount of pruning when properly chosen and maintained. Though some pruning may be beneficial, there is a definite right way and a definite wrong way to prune these small trees; the wrong way is sometimes referred to as “crape murder.”

Crape myrtles are tough, adaptable, and showy all year long. They have few pests, bloom all summer, and have an unusual exfoliating bark that reveals a colorful smooth trunk. The foliage has lustrous green leaves that change to bright fall colors, and their trunks can be single- or multi-stemmed with a beautiful branching structure and shape.

I cannot say one bad thing about the *Lagerstroemia indica*. They require little maintenance, are easy to grow—if provided with a sunny location—and can tolerate a variety of soils. There are cultivars that range in sizes from dwarf that could be grown in containers or used as shrubby ground covers,

to shrubs up to about 15 feet or tree forms that grow up to 30 feet. The crape myrtle is the perfect plant in the right place.

I can say bad things about the humans that have made a horrid ritual of butchering crape myrtles. I do not know of any educated horticulturist or arborist that endorses the practice of topping crape myrtles or any ornamental trees for that matter. Some top because the tree grows too large for where it was planted. Don't plant a 30-foot crape myrtle in a space designed for a 10-foot tree. There are many smaller types available including mildew resistant ones. Many of the newer varieties such as Acoma (white), Hopi (pink), Tonto (fuchsia), and Velma's Royal Delight (purple) make beautiful small trees that never need to be topped, sprayed, or pruned.

Improper pruning: topping, or pollarding, involves cutting stems back to an arbitrarily chosen height rather than pruning back to a bud, side branch, or main stem. Topping is harmful in that stem decay significantly increases when cuts are made and more dead branches also occur within the canopy (Gilman, E.F. and G.W. Knox 2005. Pruning type affects decay and structure of crape myrtle. *Journal of Arboriculture* 31 (1):48-52.). Topping results in numerous vigorous shoots originating from the top of the cut stem so the natural form is ruined. This is especially noticed in winter after leaf fall. Then the quick growing shoots that appear from the cut are weak and when the large bloom develops at the end of each shoot, it is top heavy and droops unnaturally, making it more likely to break off.

Another way topping is harmful is the increased susceptibility of the weak shoots to pest problems (like aphids) resulting in unnecessary use of pesticides. A healthy crape myrtle has little to no pest problems. Topping is an added expense for the maintenance due to wrong plant selection. Know your maximum space then choose the proper size tree for that space. Crape myrtles can produce basal suckers in response to topping also. It's just unsightly and unhealthy!

Proper pruning: includes removal of dead, diseased, broken, crossing, or rubbing branches to improve the plant health and appearance. If part of a branch needs to be removed, make a heading cut above an outward facing bud or side branch. For a whole branch, make a thinning cut just outside the branch collar of the stem to which the branch is attached. No pruning paint is needed. If you feel that strong urge to prune your crape myrtle, wait till early spring and remove any new suckers that appear from the ground or main trunks. And after the bloom period, the dried seed pods could be pruned off. Keep in mind this does not promote any more blooms or promote faster re-bloom, but for you folks that feel that need to prune this is a safe area for aesthetics only! Some of the most beautiful crape myrtles are old, unpruned ones along roadsides or around old abandoned houses.

Crape myrtle varieties grown in Florida are Acoma, Arapaho, Basham's Party Pink, Biloxi, Burgundy Cotton, Carolina Beauty, Catawba, Dynamite, Firebird, Miami, Muskogee, Natchez, Osage, Pink Velour, Raspberry Sundae, Red Rocket, Sioux, Tuscarora, Tuskegee, Twilight, Water Melon Red, and Zuni.

For more information on the Crape myrtle tree visit University of Florida's website gardening in a minute at: [www.gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/giam/plants\\_and\\_grasses/flowering\\_plants/crape\\_myrtle.html](http://www.gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/giam/plants_and_grasses/flowering_plants/crape_myrtle.html). Non-biased tree care info is available on the Hillsborough County Extension Service's Urban & Community Forestry program's website at: <http://urbanforestry.ifas.ufl.edu/TreePruning.shtml>. This website provides information on tree planting, pruning, disease and insect diagnosis, how to find a professional arborist, tree planting grant opportunities, and information on tree removal/pruning permits. Check with your local extension office for information on tree planting in your area.

Contact your local county UF/IFAS Extension office for more information on Florida-friendly landscaping or visit [floridayards.org](http://floridayards.org). To order one (1) free Florida-friendly handbook and plant list from the Southwest Florida Water Management District, go to [WaterMatters.org](http://WaterMatters.org). For more information on Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program go to <http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu>.

The FYN Community Association Outreach program in Hillsborough, Polk, Pinellas and Pasco counties is funded by the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the Boards of County Commissioners. ■

## FEATURED PLANT:

*Lagerstroemia indica*, Crape myrtle is often known as the "plant of the 100-day bloom." This perfect plant was introduced to the United States from China in late 1700s. They are most happy in zones seven through nine. Powdery mildew is a common pest you will find with crape myrtles and that's usually resulting from not enough sunlight. They prefer a well-drained soil but will tolerate any. It is probably the most popular tree, yet the most mistreated in the landscape. Flowers range from white to dark purple. Trunks naturally peel (exfoliate) as they age and reveal a beautiful, smooth grey to burgundy color depending on the variety and its location.