

No More Crape Murder

Crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) was introduced in 1747 from Asia and has been a gardener's favorite ever since. The numerous cultivated varieties of crapemyrtle have many fine attributes such as exfoliating bark, lustrous leaves that range from dark green to dark red, and beautiful flowers that range in shade from white, pink, purple, and red. Not surprisingly, the fall color of some varieties rivals that of the lovely red maple.

The Crapemyrtle also carries the distinction among gardeners and horticulturists as the plant butchered in the worst way by uninformed property maintenance companies and homeowners. 'Crape murder' is a term that is used to describe this horrific pruning that many unfortunate crapemyrtles must endure. Crape murder occurs when homeowners or landscape maintenance companies arbitrarily cut the trunk and limbs of a crapemyrtle back to a randomly selected point. This activity leaves the plant with a basic set of stunted trunks that generate new sprouts in the following year.

There are many myths associated with crape murder. Most people improperly prune their trees in this manner because they have been told that it will add flowers, invigorate the tree, or permanently reduce its size. Other people opt to do it because their neighbors have done it and it seemed like the right thing to do. Unfortunately, this type of pruning stresses the tree; this stress results in less flower production, more problems with pest and disease, and the early death of the plant.

Crapemyrtles are trained by nurseries into two basic shapes: single-stemmed/tree-form and multi-stemmed. To achieve these shapes, growers allow crapemyrtles to grow for a year in either containers or fields, and then cut them down to the ground in the spring of the second year. Later that summer when the plant has grown many stems from the original root system, the grower will choose the single best stem and train it into a single-stemmed tree-form tree or choose an odd number of the best stems (3 or 5 for example) for a multi-stemmed tree. These trees are then grown to a saleable size and purchased by landscapers and homeowners.



Crapemyrtles come in all shapes, colors, and sizes; they can be trained to be single or multi-stemmed depending on owner preference.

Pruning crapemyrtles so that they retain the appropriate form is relatively simple. Most importantly, prune the trees in the winter when they are dormant. For trees that are just the right height or shorter, simply prune off the old flower heads and seedpods. If the tree was perfect last year but the past summer's growth made the plant too tall, remove just that growth at lateral branches or stem forks. Always remove any suckers that have sprouted from the roots or lower trunk. The key is to not allow the trees to become so overgrown that extreme pruning is ever necessary.



By pruning off just the seedpods, we have allowed these plants to retain their natural form and size.

Sometimes though, a harsh pruning is necessary. Overgrown crapemyrtles can be pruned in such a way as to minimize the aesthetic impact of the removal of sizable portions of the tree. Begin by identifying the main stems or first tier branches and avoid cutting these. Next, prune out interior limbs that are undesirable and suckers that have grown from the roots. Finally, decide the height you wish the tree to become. Make cuts at this height on the second and third tier branches. Be sure that your cuts are placed at stem forks or secondary branches. The tree canopy should be umbrella shaped when you finish. If it looks like a baseball bat, well, you've just committed CRAPE MURDER!

Which Crapemyrtle Do You Prefer?



*Topped
Crapemyrtles*



*Well-Pruned
Crapemyrtles*

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