

Crape Myrtles Provide Summer Color

By Susan Camp

Summer is crape myrtle season in southeastern Virginia, and the attractive shrubs and trees are in full bloom. The colorful array of pink, watermelon, red, lavender, purple, and white blossoms are a delight on a washed-out summer day. The beautiful bark of crape myrtles exfoliates to provide visual and textural interest.

Crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), also spelled crepe myrtle and crapemyrtle, was first introduced to North America from Asia in 1747, and quickly gained popularity as a garden ornamental. *L. indica* is prone to powdery mildew and not cold hardy in some regions. *Lagerstroemia fauriei* was introduced from Japan in the 1950's and hybridized with *L. indica* to produce many of the hardy, elegant crape myrtles we see today. Thirty hybrids were developed at the United States National Arboretum. The popular, 30 foot tall, white-blossomed 'Natchez' was the first hybrid produced.

Crape myrtle cultivars range in height from 4 to 30 feet, with spreads of 5 to 20 feet. The most important factor to consider when selecting crape myrtle specimens is the planting site. Trees must have sufficient room to reach their mature height and spread. Crape myrtles that grow too large for their spaces often are "topped", meaning the crowns are chopped off. This is "crape murder", which raises the hackles of gardeners, horticulturists, and Extension Agents everywhere. Most crape myrtles require only light pruning in spring or early summer to remove dead or crossed branches. Pruning in cold weather can decrease cold hardiness. Light pruning encourages increased flowering, but unpruned crape myrtles will produce some blossoms. The ideal tree shape consists of the three to five strongest trunks, which allows air to circulate freely, preventing powdery mildew and other fungal diseases from developing. Limbing up, or removing lower branches, is done as the tree grows in height. Basal sprouts or suckers should be pulled up or cut before they become too large. Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1009 "Crape Myrtle Pruning" offers detailed pruning instructions.

Crape myrtles thrive in sand, loam, or clay with good drainage and a pH of 4.5 to 7.3, but they will adapt to poor soil, as long as they get plenty of sun. Even light shade decreases flowering, as does too much water or fertilizer. Crape myrtles are cold hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 6a to 9. They should be planted in spring or early summer and irrigated during hot, dry spells for the first two seasons. Basic information is provided in the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1040.

Powdery mildew is a fungal disease that occurs during dry weather in late summer, especially when the humidity is high and air circulation between plants is decreased because of overcrowding. If you notice grayish-white film on your crape myrtles or other plants, you can spray with horticultural oil, which is much less toxic than a fungicide. Always follow package directions.

Colonies of tiny, yellowish-green crape myrtle aphids can attach to the underside of leaves to suck the sap, excreting the sweet substance known as honeydew. Sooty mold, a fungus, will grow in the honeydew, causing grayish discoloration of leaves and stems. You can spray aphids with insecticidal soap or dislodge them with a strong burst of water from the hose. Ladybird beetles (ladybugs) and parasitic wasps help to control aphids.

Japanese beetles can invade crape myrtles. If there are just a few insects on low branches, try tapping the branches over a bucket of soapy water. Harsh pesticides will kill aphid predators like the ladybird beetle. Avoid using Japanese beetle traps, which contain sex pheromones. You will only attract your neighbors' beetles! The National Arboretum article "Crapemyrtle Questions and Answers" can help with pest and disease problems.

Crape myrtles are visible everywhere in our region, because of their hardiness, lush foliage, and panicles of colorful flowers. They make handsome additions along roadways, in parks, and next to businesses and homes.

July 14, 2016