

Cultivating Crape Myrtles

Crape myrtles steal the show in summery landscapes, but the attention-grabbing star does require proper coaching.

Popular gardening commentator Neil Sperry says to pick a sunny location (6 to 8 hours of sun daily) with deep, moist soil. Then get colors and sizes (at maturity) correct for that location. For small spaces, pick shrub sizes--from 18-inch-tall miniatures to 4-foot-tall dwarfs. For open areas, select intermediate sizes (8 to 12 feet tall) or even tall tree sizes (20 feet or more in height).

“The only way to know exactly what to expect from a new crape myrtle is to select named and labeled varieties,” Neil advises. Another tip: Since you can plant container-grown crape myrtles any time of the year, buy plants already in full flower. That way, you’ll see what color you have. (Remember to protect them from highway wind on the drive home.

Search for the correct variety—based on color, size, and other characteristics--on Texas A&M University’s internet database at <http://horticulture.tamu.edu:7998/crapemyrtle/search.html>.

Left untended, crape myrtles grow into bushes. But, when properly pruned, taller varieties grow into graceful trees, says Greg Grant, a horticulture lecturer at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches. “The common practice of drastically pruning the tops of crape myrtles each year is the single biggest mistake people make,” he says. “Severe topping is what I call crape murder. It destroys their natural beauty.”

Proper pruning to create a tree-like form is simple, Greg says. Just thin out all but 3 to 7 permanent trunks on young crape myrtles. Then remove new suckers (or shoots) that appear from the ground or from the main trunks.

You may thin out lower branches (cut flush, leaving no stub) that would hide the attractive main trunks, adds Neil Sperry. You may also remove spent flower heads. “But never cut anything from the top of a crape myrtle larger than a pencil in diameter.”

While generally drought-resistant, crape myrtles, particularly young ones, perform best with regular watering (done when the soil becomes dry 1 inch deep). Keep water off leaves, however, to reduce powdery mildew, a disease which causes a gray dusting on leaves. Control severe cases with appropriate fungicides. In mid- to late-summer, crape myrtle aphids (tiny pear-shaped insects) may appear but are controlled with an approved insecticide.

You can encourage flowers on young plants by applying a high-nitrogen fertilizer in spring. Established plants simply feed off fertilizer applied to your lawn. Do not fertilize after late summer, so the plants will go completely dormant before winter.

For site-specific information, contact your local county extension service. Helpful websites include: <http://dallas.tamu.edu/woody/cmyrtle/index.html>, <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/trees/crape.html>, and http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/scripts/htmlgen.exe?DOCUMENT_MG266.

--Randy Mallory