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Crape Myrtles

History, Selection, Care, and Maintenance in North Texas

Crape myrtles are one of our most popular blooming shrubs in North Texas! The "original" *Indica* crape myrtles are native to China and the first records of it being brought to the United States date back to the late 1700's. These crape myrtles were pretty, usually left unpruned in any way, but were very prone to powdery mildew. In 1956, a second major variety of crape myrtle, the *faurei*, was introduced here from Japan - these almost pure white types had wonderful exfoliating bark and excellent disease resistance. The hybrids bred from careful crossing of these two types at the National Arboretum, university research programs, and good old fashioned entrepreneurs (commercial growers) around the country since then make up some of our most popular named varieties today, with an enormous color palette of whites, pinks, lavenders, and reds and heights from as small as 2' to as large as 30' in upright, rounded, and weeping habits. Add to this the fact that most crape myrtles bloom for around three months a year, and it's safe to say that as long as you have a nice, sunny area, there's probably a crape myrtle that can grow to fit your landscape needs!

Proper Selection:

Selection of your crape myrtle begins with knowing a few key factors:

- What color do I want?
- How tall do I want this plant to get?
- What kind of shape do I want from my plant?
- All other things equal, which choice has better disease resistance?

The color of the crape myrtle is what most folks look for first! There's a wonderful selection of just about every kind of white, lavender, pink, red, and variation on these colors available, and some types are even bi-color (two colors on the same blossom, typically pink and white). Bi-color crapes just aren't our favorite; stress can cause most pink-white combinations to come out solidly pink. Stress isn't something unfamiliar to plants in North Texas! Determine the color you're interested in, then look at the following important factors.

Crape myrtles are roughly grouped into the following major height categories.

- **Miniature** - usually weeping types, typically 3' or shorter
- **Dwarf** - falling into the 3-6' height range, generally upright or rounded
- **Intermediate** - rounded or upright plants usually, 6-12' in height
- **Tall** - often called "standard", not to be confused with a single trunk, 15'+

Plan which selections to look at based upon their mature height. Never chop a taller type you happen to like the looks of to control the height!

The shape of the plant is another consideration. "Upright" or "vase" shaped crape myrtles are taller than they are wide. "Rounded" or "globose" types are every bit as wide at the top as they are tall, and you should plan for this accordingly. "Spreading" types are wider than they are tall - there's not very many of these commercially grown, but there are a few. "Weeping" types are generally miniature, and are left alone to develop their natural form. Most crapes used in residential landscapes are upright, or rounded.

The last consideration is the natural disease resistance of the types you've selected. Proper planting and care avoids most powdery mildew issues before they start; but very rainy weather or cloud cover for extended periods can encourage mildew growth. Some types of crape myrtle are simply more resistant to this disease, and if you've two choices that will fill your height, shape, and color requirements, you should use the type with the best disease resistance.

Proper Siting:

Where you place your new crape myrtle makes a huge difference to the overall health, vigor, and beauty of your mature plant! Make sure to follow these guidelines for the best success. Crape myrtles are properly planted in full sun - not partial sun, not shade, not "fairly sunny" - full, blazing, happy sun is what you're looking for, and at least seven hours of direct sun is the minimum! Crape myrtles will certainly live in less light, but they're never as vigorous or full, and they're more prone to leaf diseases than the exact same plant put in a nice sunny area.

Plant your crape myrtle next to nothing! No walls, fences, large shrubs - plant crape myrtles where they have excellent airflow, leaving several feet of spacing around the plant for good air circulation. If you limb your crape myrtle up to expose clean trunks later, it's fine to plant some smaller perennials or shrubs underneath; but the proper airflow keeps your plant happier. The second reason to plant your crape myrtle with some good spacing is simple - if a taller crape is going to be twelve feet wide at maturity, it doesn't make sense to plant it two feet away from your home! Leave enough room that the plants can grow to their full normal habit for the variety you selected.

There's just one place we really recommend to not plant a beautiful crape myrtle near in the sun - the home swimming pool. Crape myrtles do throw many spent flowers and unless your pool skimmer is amazing, you'll be cursing the spent blooms in your pool filter.

When planting crape myrtles in a freestanding bed where you desire to plant more than one crape myrtle, plant several of the same color in clusters. This color massing will make a much larger impact when the bed is viewed from a distance, and the bed in general will look much more impressive than the same bed of, say, three crape myrtles planted in different colors. It doesn't matter which color you select as much as the plants being the same color. You should still maintain the recommended distance apart for the plants' mature size.

Proper Planting

Planting a crape myrtle is not any different than planting any other common tree or shrub in North Texas. In a prepared bed, just plant it so that the soil line of the top of the root ball in the container is slightly above grade. In a pocket planting situation, dig a hole roughly twice the diameter of the root ball, amend the existing native soil with a mixture of compost and expanded shale, and plant the

root ball slightly above grade, again. Mulch both plantings thoroughly - add a 2" layer of your favorite mulch, whatever you like as long as it's organic, can rot, and won't float. Good choices for this purpose are hardwood mulch, cedar mulch, cypress mulch - these aren't the only choices, but they are good ones. Water your newly planted crape myrtle *heavily* at planting, and *heavily* again for the next two days, then begin your normal maintenance routine. Water newly planted crape myrtles generously! It's technically possible to overwater a crape myrtle, but it's not easy!

How, When, and IF to prune:

Crape myrtles need far less pruning than most people provide! Here's the Do's and Don'ts when it comes to crape myrtle pruning.

DO:

- Remove entire limbs or branches cleanly at the ground or the next limb as you wish to improve the form of the crape myrtle. Limbing up your crape myrtle to expose clean trunks is O.K.
- Remove any cracked, damaged, tangled up branches or trunks, at the next healthy branch, trunk, or ground level. Leave nicely spread, open trunk structures.

DON'T:

- Chop back your crape myrtles, ever, ever, ever! If anyone claims to be a landscape professional or arborist and they want to do this to your crape myrtle, it's a good indicator they aren't professional! This is known in the industry as "Crape Murder" because of the damage it does to the form of your healthy plant. If your crape myrtle is too tall for where it is planted, it's simply too tall and needs to be moved to a better location next winter, or simply removed, to be replaced with a crape myrtle of the proper mature height and width.
- Tip off seeds to clean the plant up. You may, if you wish, remove spent seeds as long as nothing larger than the diameter of a no.2 pencil is being cut off, but it's not necessary or even helpful for the blooming of the crape myrtle to do so. Clean off seeds if you just can't stand them, but otherwise, it's better to simply leave the seeds alone. The crape myrtle will clean itself off in time.

Proper Maintenance:

The maintenance of a new crape myrtle is not difficult, it just requires due diligence! Newly planted crape myrtles like water, and loads of it. If the crape myrtle is planted in the cool season, water it well. If the season is hot (say, you wait until summer to plant your crape myrtle so you can really see the color instead of the tag color), water a newly planted crape myrtle even more! Well established crape myrtles are reasonably drought tolerant but new ones need the waterhose, plenty and often. The sprinkler **is not enough.**

Feed your crape myrtle root stimulator and our Covington's Special fertilizer for the best success, and mulch the new plant with a good 2" or deeper layer of your favorite mulch. Mulch degrades over time and thus you will need to add mulch at least once a year to maintain a nice, thick layer of mulch over the root zone.

As a special note with sprinkler systems, avoid creating problems you don't need. The risers on many sprinkler systems can easily spray the foliage of a young crape myrtle, and this is not desirable. Adjust your sprinkler system to water the soil, not the leaves of your plant. When watering with the hose, the roots are the target. Don't contribute to disease issues that aren't necessary.

Troubleshooting Your Plant:

Once in a while, even the best planted, established crape myrtles can have a health issue pop up. The most common issues are the likely ones - below, the answers to most of the problems that might pop up for you.

- **There's a white powder on my leaves, and those leaves are twisted and cupped, also, some leaves are falling off:** Powdery mildew, treatable with ferti-lome Systemic Fungicide, Daconil, or Neem oil. Rake fallen leaves away.
- **There's a sticky residue on my leaves, and it is raining under my plant:** Aphids on your new growth, treat with almost any pesticide imaginable as long as you treat every 3-4 days, they're easy to kill, they just breed fast. Ladybugs work great, too!
- **There are small white lumps all over my trunks and branches and it's sticky, too:** This is a new type of felt scale, jury's still out if it's an introduced pest from Asia or a native scale that's learned to eat crape myrtle, treat during the winter with dormant oil, treat during the summer with ferti-lome Systemic Insect Drench and a summer-weight horticultural oil.
- **There's black mold all over my trunks! Eww!:** You have one of the two above problems, aphids or the scale insect - the honeydew they leave (read, bug manure) is mostly sugar water. Airborne molds grow in it, and a common one around here is a black mold. It's harmless, just messy. It will weather off in enough time, but you need to treat the correct insect pest causing the problem.

The above issues account for 99% of the possible problems you will face in our area. There are a few others, but they're rarely serious. Watch for these and you'll be fine.

Some of our favorites, and interesting crape myrtle information:

We wanted to give some pointers on some of our favorite (and most popular) types of crape myrtle in our area at this point. Some of the highlights follow!

Natchez: One of the best white crape myrtles, it's been around since the late '70's and has outstanding disease resistance combined with a wonderful exfoliating bark and a truly long bloom season. Natchez can bloom for close to four months out of the year!

Tuscarora: A nice upright form with a brilliant coral pink bloom, Tuscarora isn't overly wide for the height and has great disease resistance.

Twilight, Catawba, and Zuni: These are some of the best purple crape myrtles around. Twilight is a full-sized upright plant, Catawba a mid-sized upright plant, and Zuni is an intermediate grower, giving a great range of sizes in some of the darkest purple colors available. (Twilight and Catawba are the darkest purple. Keep the plants well watered and well mulched and fed for the darkest color.)

Breeders are always seeking new color expressions of your favorite and toughest plants, and the quest for the true red crape myrtle was the Holy Grail of crape myrtle breeders in the last half of the 20th century. The original crape myrtles brought to the States were pink and lavender colors, with pure whites being an introduction from Japan in the 1950's - but just like animal breeders do with dogs, horses, and other livestock, plant breeders sought purer coloration in their stock, and carefully preserved unusual sports (mutations), and cross bred desirable varieties that were closer to the desired colors until they found colors in the seedlings to their liking. "Watermelon Red" was considered red by most from its introduction in the 1920's to the modern day because it was much redder than most available, and was planted extensively in the Dallas area because of this.

"Watermelon Red" is not red. It's a darkish pink. Obviously, improvements could be made here.

Pure red crape myrtles are now available in a variety of sizes and habits due mostly to the research of two sets of people - the National Arboretum and Dr. Carl Whitcomb. The quest for steady improvements in the red crape myrtles continue, but the Whitcomb series of crape myrtles (by far the most popular pure reds) still have a few quirks in their growth habits we'd like to go into to help you better succeed in having the pure red show we'd all desire from these plants.

"Dynamite" and "Red Rocket" are two of the best pure red upright plants, but they share an odd quirk - the bloom is white inside the bud and the color only fixes within the blossom in the ten to fifteen minutes after the bud opens. If the bud is in shade when it first cracks open, the bloom can be lighter than usual, even pinkish to white. Heat improves the bloom color, providing a darker red. Drought conditions can also cause pinkish or white coloration of the blooms (the color can't quickly move into the petals right after the bud cracks without good sap flow to move it - drought conditions mean less sap volume), so support your pure red crape myrtles with excellent mulch and a good amount of water during the blooming period. "Dynamite" and "Red Rocket" freshly delivered to a nursery often break pinkish or even with white edges shortly after delivery, as they've been in an enormous box truck in complete darkness during shipping. Don't worry about it. If planted properly in full sun, you'll have the nice deep cherry red on the next set of blooms.

"Siren", one of the newest Whitcomb series of reds, is pure red even in the bud. The color has no variation regardless of weather conditions (clouds, etc.). Progress marches on!

The Whitcomb series of crape myrtles are mostly sterile to sterile plants, meaning that there are fewer seeds to no seeds formed as the blooms progress. This is a desirable thing which provides faster reblooming on your crape myrtle, but as the plants were bred to continuously rebloom, the plant will not put on much growth beyond the blooming once the bloom cycle has started. To encourage vigorous growth on Whitcomb series crape myrtles, fertilize them heavily right as new growth begins in the spring to maximize their growth for the season. Once the plants begin to flower, there will be little height and size growth for the remainder of the year. Keep the plants well fed to encourage continuous reblooming.

We at Covington's hope this guide helps you to achieve your best planting success with crape myrtles in our area.