

Pruning Crapemyrtles

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The appeal of crapemyrtle

One of Virginia's most popular yet mistreated landscape plants is the beautiful crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*, *L. fauriei*, and *L. indica* with *L. fauriei* or *L. speciosa* hybrids). Selected and prized for their long summer bloom period (often called the "plant of the 100 day bloom"), cultivars have a range of flower colors, with an interesting seed head following the flower. In addition, crapemyrtles have lustrous green leaves that change to bright fall colors, subtle to stunning multi-colored bark, and unique winter architecture that makes this plant exceed most landscape choices for four-season interest and appeal.



Choose the right cultivar for your landscape

Crapemyrtles are low-maintenance and easy to grow if provided with sunny locations and soil with moderate moisture and fertility. Various nurseries, private breeders, and The United States National Arboretum have developed a wide variety of crapemyrtle cultivars (cultivated varieties) that can fit almost any landscape need. Cultivars now range in size from dwarfs that can be grown in containers and hanging baskets, or used as shrubby ground covers, to shrub (up to about 15 feet) and tree forms (to 25 to 30 feet).

Choosing the right crapemyrtle for your landscape requires evaluating where it will be planted, not just what color its flowers are. Will the plant be used in a perennial border or near a building foundation, or will it be a centerpiece specimen in a large grassy area or bed? The smaller the space available, the smaller the crapemyrtle (at maturity) should be, so be sure to



Crapemyrtles range in size from small, low shrubs to small trees.



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choose a cultivar that will not require pruning to make it “fit” into the landscape (see cultivar listing at the end of this publication).



These crape myrtles require yearly pruning because they are a cultivar that grows too large for this location.

Preventing “crape murder”

Crape 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 plants, with the wrong way often referred to as “crape murder.”

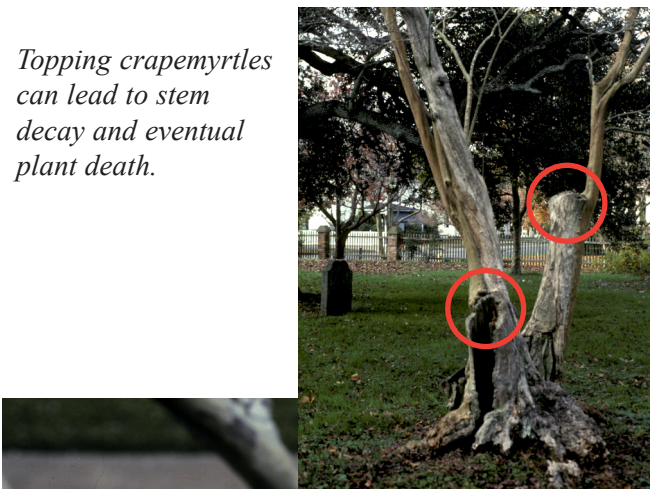
The wrong way to prune. A misconception that crape myrtles need to be severely cut back in late winter or early spring in order to flower well in summer has led to the unhealthy practice of topping these plants. If necessary, crape myrtles can be reduced in height without being topped.

Topping (buck horning or dehorning) involves cutting stems back at an arbitrarily chosen height rather than pruning back to a bud, side branch, or main stem. Topping trees and shrubs is harmful in many ways and regarded as an unacceptable practice by trained horticulturists and arborists (see *A Guide to Successful Pruning: Stop Topping Trees!*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 430-458). Research shows that stem decay significantly increases when topping cuts are made, and that 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 crape myrtles results in numerous vigorous shoots originating from the top of the cut stems. This ruins the natural form of the plant, which is especially obvious in winter after leaf drop. These quick growing, succulent shoots are poorly attached. The large bloom that develops on the end of each shoot is top heavy, often causing the shoot to break off in strong winds.



All of these crape myrtles have been improperly pruned or topped.



In addition, topping can greatly reduce the number of bloom days because only one main flower cluster is borne on the end shoots instead of many smaller flower clusters with staggered bloom times.



Numerous vigorous shoots develop where stems are topped (top left and top right). These stems may become top-heavy with flower clusters (center), and will often break off (right).



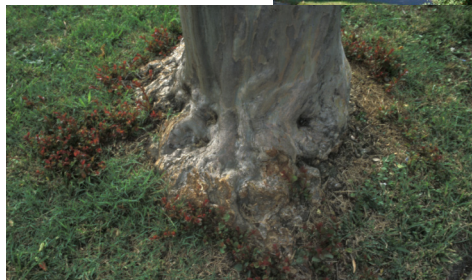
The same cultivar, naturalistically pruned (above) and topped (right). Note the "witches' broom" appearance of the topped plant.

Another problem caused by topping is increased susceptibility of the succulent shoots to pest problems (especially aphids), resulting in otherwise unnecessary use of pesticides.

Plants wounded by topping often produce large numbers of basal suckers. Though re-suckering can sometimes be suppressed by applying naphthalene acetic acid (NAA) after pruning, picking the wrong cultivar relative to height and then having to repeatedly top or prune back the plant results in added expense. Avoid fertilizing crape myrtles unless a soil test indicates a special need because excessive fertilization can encourage sucker growth and reduce flowering.



Basal suckers frequently develop on topped plants (left and below), and will need to be cut back each year (bottom).



Crape myrtles that have previously been topped can, to an extent, be "untopped." Select two or three of the stronger shoots per "topping knuckle" (the knob that develops where the topping cut was made) and prune the others off. Then prune (head back) the selected shoots above outward facing buds to begin to develop a new branch pattern. The plant will never again have its true or natural crape myrtle form, but it can be improved.



The right way to prune. Some of the prettiest crape-myrtles in Virginia are old, unpruned plants along roadsides. Individual flower clusters are often smaller but the number of flower clusters is generally far greater than on over-pruned plants, and the bloom season is extended.

Because crape-myrtles are summer-blooming trees, producing flowers from new wood or current season stems, the proper time to prune is late winter or early spring prior to new growth. Do not prune crape-myrtles in late summer or early fall because new shoots that grow may freeze if they fail to go fully dormant.

Pruning a crape-myrtle requires the same procedures used for any tree or shrub. Proper pruning techniques will ensure an abundance of blooms, as well as a healthy plant for many years to come. See *A Guide to Successful Pruning: Pruning Basics and Tools*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 430-455, and *A Guide to Successful Pruning: Pruning Shrubs*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 430-459, for details.

When pruning crape-myrtles, practice naturalistic pruning that maintains the shape and form of each unique cultivar. Start early in the life of the plant by removing dead, diseased, broken, crossing, and rubbing branches to improve overall plant health and appearance. A well-trained crape-myrtle will not need yearly pruning so continue that practice only as needed to develop sound structure and enhance the plant's health.

If only part of a branch needs to be removed make a heading cut above an outward facing bud or side branch. If an entire branch needs to be removed, make a thinning cut just outside the branch collar of the stem to which the branch is attached. Do not apply any materials (pruning paint, etc.) to the cut ends. Encouraging new stems to grow away from the center opens up the plant, increasing light penetration and air movement, and reduces potential wind damage and insect (aphids) or disease (powdery mildew) problems.

If suckers develop, rub them off while they're young and succulent or prune them off with a thinning cut back to the main stem. Sometimes branch tips are cut back after flowering occurs to remove old flower clusters or prevent seedpods from forming. Though summer tip pruning may lead to a second flowering in cultivars that bloom before mid-July, its generally impractical, produces inconsistent results, and isn't necessary to promote flowering the following year.

If larger and more profuse flowers are desired on dwarf crape-myrtles used in containers or as low plants in shrub borders, prune them back severely (to within six inches of the ground) each year.



A plant that has been thinned of small twigs (left). Making a heading cut (center left and right). Making a thinning cut (right).

Select Crapemyrtle Cultivars for Virginia

Cultivar	Flower Color	Trunk Color	Fall Foliage Color	Form
Dwarf shrub or ground cover - 3 to 5 feet				
Centennial	bright purple	tan	orange	compact globe
Chickasaw	light pinkish lavender	light gray	bronze red	compact miniature
Pocomoke	deep rose pink	light gray	bronze red	compact miniature
Victor	dark red	tan	yellow	compact upright
Semi-dwarf shrub – 5 to 10 feet				
Acoma	white*	light gray	red purple	spreading semipendulous
Caddo	bright pink	light cinnamon brown	orange red	low spreading
Hopi	light pink*	light gray brown	orange red	dense, rounded
Pecos	clear medium pink*	dark brown	maroon	low dense
Tonto	fuchsia	cream to taupe	maroon	dense
Zuni	medium lavender	light brown gray	dark red orange	dense
Large shrub to small tree – 10 to 20 feet				
Catawba	violet purple	light gray brown	red orange	dense
Centennial Spirit	dark wine red	beige	red orange	upright
Comanche	coral pink	light sandalwood	purple red	broad
Lipan	medium lavender	near white	orange russet	broad
Osage	clear pink*	mottled chestnut brown	red	open spreading
Pink Velour	hot pink	tan	red	upright
Powhatan	medium purple	light gray brown	yellow orange	dense
Raspberry Sundae	pinkish red with white	tan	maroon	almost columnar
Sarah's Favorite	white	cinnamon brown	red orange	upright
Sioux	dark pink	medium gray brown	red purple	dense upright
Yuma	lavender	light gray	yellow orange	broad
Large tree – 20 feet and larger				
Biloxi	pale pink	dark brown	orange red	upright vase
Choctaw	bright pink	light cinnamon brown	bronze maroon	upright rounded
Dynamite	cherry red	light beige	crimson	upright rounded
Miami	dark coral pink	dark chestnut brown	red orange	rounded vase
Muskogee	light lavender	light gray brown	red orange	broad tall
Natchez	white	cinnamon brown	yellow to red orange	tall arching
Potomac	clear pink	light gray brown	yellow orange	upright
Red Rocket	cherry red	tan	red orange	upright
Tuscarora	dark coral pink*	mottled light brown	red orange	vase
Tuskegee	dark pink to red	mottled light gray to tan	red orange	broad

*high recurrent flowering

Single vs. multiple-trunk tree forms

If you want a tree-form crapemyrtle, select a taller growing cultivar and be sure you have adequate space for its crown to mature without excessive pruning. Crapemyrtles to be used as small trees can be purchased or pruned either into single or multiple trunk forms. To develop a single trunk form, start with just one stem or rooted cutting. To develop a multi-trunk tree form, select three to five evenly spaced stems and remove all others at ground level. As the tree grows, gradually remove lower branches (crown raising) to no more than one-third to one-half way up the plant.



The Natchez cultivar trained as a single stem (left) and a multi-stem (right).

Continue to remove lower branches until the desired form or clearance under the tree is attained. Limbing up exposes more attractive bark for winter landscape interest. Also continue to remove small interior branches.

Selecting crapemyrtle cultivars

The preceding table of cultivars commonly grown and sold in Virginia can help with selecting the right crapemyrtle cultivar for specific landscape situations or locations. (Heights are approximate and will vary across Virginia based on hardiness zone, other local environmental conditions, and maintenance.)

Resources on the Web

For an extensive listing of crapemyrtle cultivars consult *Crapemyrtle in Florida* - www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/MG/MG26600.pdf

To see pictures of many of the cultivars well adapted to Virginia go to The United States National Arboretum Crapemyrtle Introductions Photo Gallery on the Web at <http://www.usna.usda.gov/PhotoGallery/CrapemyrtleGallery/>

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