



SOUTH CAROLINA FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Affiliated with National Volunteer Outreach Network, Country Women's Council, U.S.A., Associated Country Women of the World and in partnership with Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service
SCFCL website: <http://www.scfcl.com>

Leader Training Guide

How to Prune Crape Myrtles

Objectives:

After completing this lesson, students will be able to determine how to properly prune crape myrtles.

Lesson Overview/Introduction:

The first step in selecting a crape myrtle is to determine how tall and wide the plant will be at maturity so the wrong variety is not planted in the wrong place. Crape myrtle cultivar heights will range anywhere from less than four feet tall to over thirty feet. Students will learn the proper pruning methods for crape myrtles and not how to commit what is commonly called "Crape Murder". Crape myrtles bloom on new wood, therefore, prune while the plant is dormant (winter or early spring) to remove lateral branches, small twigs, or branches in the center of the plant to open more space for sun and air movement. Corrective pruning should be done to remove damaged, diseased, or dead branches when a problem is detected.

Lesson:

A crape myrtle is typically a low-maintenance plant. Choosing the cultivar best suited for the landscape situation prior to planting is the best way to ensure it doesn't become a maintenance nightmare. Crape myrtles are available in dwarf & semi-dwarf shrub sizes, as well as small, medium, and large tree selections. The large variety of colors and sizes provides many options to select the right size plant for a space. It is important to know how tall a selected variety will be at maturity in order to select the best plant suited for the area.

Severe pruning of crape myrtles has become a common practice to maintain shrub size. This ruins the natural, graceful effect of the plant. Many dwarf and semi-dwarf cultivars are now available, making it possible for the homeowner to have the desired plant size while maintaining the natural branching effect.

The practice of chopping off the tops of crape myrtles, known as 'topping' is, unfortunately, very commonplace. Topping has been aptly named 'Crape Murder' by gardeners due to the murderous affect to the plants appearance resulting from the severe nature of the pruning.

Many believe 'topping' is required to promote flowering; some prune because the plant is too large for the space provided; while others see their neighbors doing it and feel they need to do it as well. There are instances in which heavy pruning is necessary, but typically, only light, if any, pruning is needed.

Improving the Shape & Structure:

Crape myrtle prefers hot, sunny climates and in South Carolina may grow to tree-size proportions. It is important for tree types to be sited where they have a large area to spread. When given an ideal location, these tree types should be allowed to develop their natural style without cutting off their tops.

To develop a tree shape, remove all but three to five of the strongest trunks at ground level. As these trunks mature, remove lower, lateral branches in order to limb up one-third to halfway the height of the plant. Remove branches that are crossing or rubbing against each other as well as shoots growing into the center of the canopy. Make cuts to a side branch or close to the trunk. Head back wayward and unbranched limbs. As the tree grows taller, remove lower branches as needed. Remove any future growth from the ground to retain the desired tree shape. This basal sprouting may occur whether the tree has been pruned or not. When possible, pull these sprouts out while still succulent, instead of pruning them to maintain a smoother, cleaner trunk base.

Seed Heads:

The plant's appearance can further be improved by removing the seed heads in late winter or early spring before growth begins. This is recommended only if they are within reach. Once it becomes a tall, mature plant, allow nature to take its course - the seed heads will drop, the plant will bloom, and the natural grace of the plant will be retained.

Flowering:

Flowers on crape myrtle are produced on new growth. Although it will produce larger flowers and bloom more profusely if lightly pruned, crape myrtle will produce plenty of flowers without any pruning. If pruning is necessary to stimulate new growth, prune in late winter or early spring. On smaller plants, encourage a second bloom in summer by pruning flowers immediately after they fade.

Overgrown Plants:

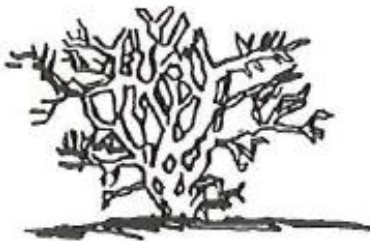
When confronted with a large, old crape myrtle that has overgrown its space, consider all options prior to settling on top pruning. If lower limbs are interfering with people or cars, limb up lower limbs to create clearance under the canopy. If lower limbs obstruct windows or doors, prune limbs up to above the roofline of single story homes. If a tree is too close to a building, eliminate one of the major trunks to create space. Only as a last resort should a beautiful, old specimen be topped to squeeze it into a confined space.

To keep a crape myrtle at a manageable height, prune moderately by removing all twiggy growth back to lower growing side branches. This will give the plant a more uniform appearance. Refer to the diagram below that demonstrates the proper pruning methods to create a healthy vase-shaped tree that bears a multitude of flowers.

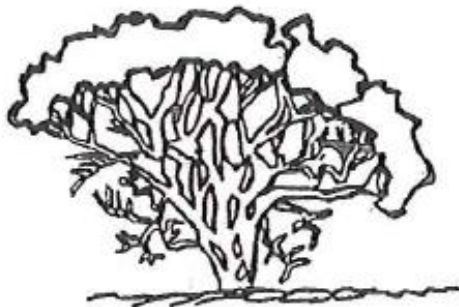
Improper method
of pruning crapemyrtle



1. Cutting on line shown by dashed line is too often done when pruning shrubs.

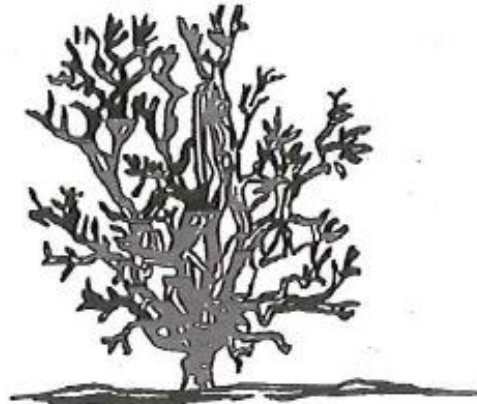


2. Same plant after being pruned as indicated above. All sucker growth remains.

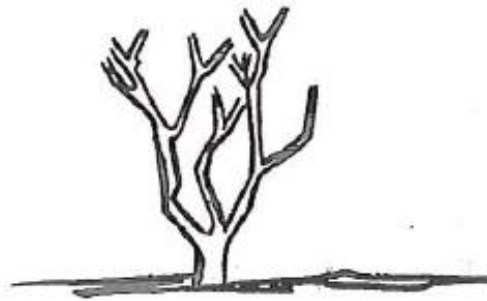


3. Final result: beautiful natural shape of shrub is lost and bloom is sparse and ineffectual.

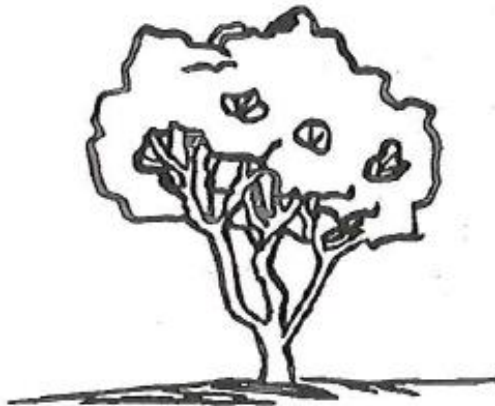
Proper method
of pruning crapemyrtle



1. Shrub before pruning. Remove all weak and dead branches.



2. Same shrub after removal of weak and interfering branches and with base sucker growth removed.



3. Final result: beautiful natural and distinctive form of plant retained. Vigorous growth and effective flowering.

Lesson Summary:

A crape myrtle is a typically low-maintenance plant. Choosing the cultivar best suited for the landscape situation prior to planting is the best way to ensure it doesn't become a maintenance nightmare. Crape myrtles are available in dwarf & semi-dwarf shrub sizes, as well as small, medium, and large tree selections. Proper pruning practices will ensure a plant with a more uniform and attractive appearance.

Suggested Activities:

Look at the landscape to determine the best crape myrtle variety to plant based on the plant's mature height.

Identify the different types of pruning tools that would be best suited for the job.

Proper care and maintenance of the pruning tools i.e. sharpening, oiling, and storage.

A hands-on demonstration showing how to properly prune a crape myrtle. Students should be involved in making the decision of what should be removed and how to correctly prune the plant.

Suggested Materials:

HGIC 1008 Crape Myrtles <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/pdf/hgic1008.pdf>

HGIC 1009 Crape Myrtle Pruning <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/pdf/hgic1009.pdf>

HGIC 1023 Crape Myrtle Varieties <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/pdf/hgic1023.pdf>

HGIC 1003 Pruning Trees <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/pdf/hgic1003.pdf>

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Sources/References:

HGIC 1009 Crape Myrtle Pruning
<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/pdf/hgic1009.pdf>

The South Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual, Clemson University Public Service Publishing, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 2007