



Guilford Gardening Journal

Timely Tips from a Professional Gardening Expert

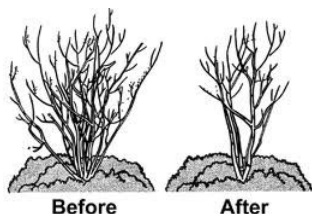
STOP CRAPE MURDER - HOW TO PROPERLY PRUNE CRAPE MYRTLES

Crape myrtles seem to be everywhere in North Carolina, and gardeners are often confused by all the ways they are pruned. All too often, people lop the top branches off crape myrtles annually, which is extremely bad for the tree. It never allows the tree to develop a strong branch structure, and it also leads to fist-like “knobs” where repeated pruning takes place. This is commonly referred to as crape murder and is a form of topping which is not recommended for any type of tree.

Applying the “Right Plant, Right Place” principle to selecting your crape myrtle before planting will make it easy to maintain your tree. Choose the correct cultivar of crape myrtle for the space where you will plant it: dwarf (less than 3 feet), semi-dwarf (3-6 feet), medium (6-12 feet), or tall (more than 12 feet). If you only have eight feet of clearance under a window, don’t plant a crape myrtle that you *know* will grow to 12 or 15 feet in that spot. While light pruning can be beneficial for crape myrtles, your goal should be to allow the plant to reach its natural size without needing to be pruned.

WHY TO PRUNE

Pruning can be beneficial to the health of both shrub and tree form crape myrtles. It directs growth and can increase flower production. It’s perfectly acceptable to just perform light pruning of your crape myrtles as needed by removing dead or diseased branches, along with any rubbing or crossing limbs. This will allow air to circulate and will also assist in insect and disease control. Prune also if your crape myrtle has narrow crotch angles, where the branches attach to the trunk. Last, prune extra growth, called “suckers,” at ground level. This will redirect the plant’s energy to the desirable branches. Growth should be directed towards the outside of the plant, so any branches pointing inwards should be removed. Never remove more than one-third of what would produce the current year’s growth.

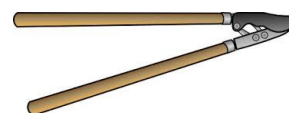


WHEN TO PRUNE

If pruning is necessary, it should be done in February/early March, just before the tree naturally breaks dormancy and starts spring growth. Pruning in fall can reduce the plant’s hardiness, making it more susceptible to winter damage. Crape myrtles are a late-budding plant, not forming flower buds until May on the current season’s growth. Pruning in February also allows you to see the limb structure clearly. Summer pruning can be done to remove faded flowers and encourage a second blooming.

TOOLS NEEDED

Use sharp tools. For the removal of smaller branches (3/4” to 1”), use hand pruners. For larger limbs, (1” to 1 1/2”) loppers must be used or you will ruin your hand pruners. Anything larger will require a hand saw, and you will want to follow the three-cut method.



HOW TO PRUNE

Start at the bottom of the tree and work your way up. If suckers have grown from the base of the trunk, prune these first. Then remove any diseased or damaged growth, and prune branches growing inward towards the interior of the plant. Pruning these out allows better light and airflow. Finally look for rubbing or crossing branches and remove one of the two. If you have time left, you can take off the old flower blooms, but this is not necessary as crape myrtles bloom on the new growth.



Written by Colette Corr,
Guilford Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

Karen Neill, Extension Agent
Agriculture – Urban Horticulture
Guilford County Cooperative Extension
336-375-5876
www.guilfordgardenanswers.org

