CRAPE MYRTLES

Professional landscapers do it, your neighbors do it, so why shouldn’t you? Unfortunately, it’s one of the most excessive and unwarranted copycat crimes committed in Florida during the early spring. So what is it? Crape murder. Crape murder is a term used for the incorrect pruning of crape myrtles. Also called “topping”, this pruning practice of crape myrtles is unnecessary. It is also a huge waste of your energy and time. It is not necessary nor is it an obligation to prune crape myrtles at the same height every year in order to have beautiful plants.

Here are some myths and facts about pruning crape myrtles.

Myth: Many professional landscapers and homeowners top their crape myrtles every year, so they must know what they are doing.

Fact: Although topping crape myrtles has been a common practice in the past, it is not a recommended practice now. However, as we know, old habits are difficult to change. As mentioned before, this is a copycat landscape practice that seems to be contagious from the commercial landscapers to homeowners.

Crape murder is a form of topping trees. Topping is cutting branches or stems to random lengths, when they should be cut back to the next branch crotch. So why has is topping crape myrtles no longer recommended? According to research at the University of Florida, trees should never be topped because it creates unhealthy trees as the wood inside the cut branch begins to decay. Also, the new sprouts, which grow in response to topping, are not well secured to the topped branch and they can easily split from the tree as they grow larger.

Myth: Crape myrtles need to be pruned at the same point each year in order to produce many flowers.

Fact: Research from the University of Florida has shown that pruning only the seed heads from the crape myrtles and no branches over a pencil-width in diameter will actually produce more flowers than topping the tree. Also, this minimal pruning of crape myrtles creates a nicer, more proportionately shaped tree, especially on trees that have only a single trunk. Over time, continuously “murdered” crape myrtles will develop large trunk diameters, but will still only have a small canopy. This can create a funny looking plant.

Myth: Crape myrtles need to be topped in order to keep a clean, small tree for the landscape.

Fact: Crape myrtles are available in many varieties, that come in all sizes from small shrubs, that are only a few feet tall, to trees that can grow over 30 feet tall. Crape myrtle is one of our most versatile landscape plants for sunny locations. They are available for use as medium trees, small trees, shrubs, groundcovers, container plants, large perennial bedding plants and
hanging baskets.

For minimum maintenance, choose a cultivar whose growth characteristics and ultimate size fit your intended landscape use. Misplacement of a shrub- or tree-like crape myrtle will require you to prune it constantly to keep it from outgrowing its place. Single- or multi-stemmed tree-form crape myrtles are ideal as flowering specimen trees or as small, flowering shade trees near patios, walkways, and entrances. Dwarf plants are effective as large groundcovers, perennial bedding plants, or container plants providing vivid, summer-flowering interest. Some dwarf crape myrtles are used in hanging baskets.

Topping crape myrtles also causes the plant to produce an abundance of suckers. Suckers are stems that grow up from the roots of the tree. To keep them looking clean, remove the suckers that grow from the base.

This article is not intended to keep you from pruning crape myrtles at all, just properly. It is ok to prune out some branches in order to see through the crape myrtles, just don’t prune to see over them. Broken, diseased, mis-shaped branches, suckers, and those that just plain get in the way may be pruned, but please cut the branches back to the next branch crotch and refrain from topping the trees. Remember only you can prevent crape myrtle murder.

The University of Florida IFAS Osceola County has the publication “Crape Myrtle in Florida” available free upon request. This publication contains information on the care of crape myrtles and a list of available varieties. To request this publication call (321) 697-3000. The Osceola County Master Gardeners are also available to answer any of your gardening questions Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

(Images courtesy Karen Russ, HGIC, Clemson Extension)

Jennifer Welshans
Osceola County Extension
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: March 2nd, 2008