

Pruning Crape Myrtles

Jennifer Pelham, Urban Horticulture Agent
University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Osceola County

Happy New Year! This is the time of year, that we start seeing the most copied landscape crime ever documented – pruning of the crape myrtles! It is not uncommon in the late winter, early spring to see the beautiful, curving branches of the crape myrtles be diminished to just stubs. Although this style of pruning, called pollarding, is a popular way to prune crape myrtles, it is not the best option for the health of the tree nor is it necessary.

Crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* species) are very popular landscape plants. They can be found in many landscapes and medians throughout central Florida. At this time of year, they are dormant, resting for the winter with no leaves or flowers to show. Although, they are without showy, colorful flowers, they do provide a winter interest in the landscape with their winding branches and exfoliating bark. Within a few weeks, as spring arrives, they will awaken and green up the landscape again, but before then, many are pruned beyond recognition.

According to University of Florida/IFAS specialist, Gary Knox, crape myrtles require little pruning. Avoid annual or frequent hard pruning. Severe pruning, such as pollarding, can induce excessive water sprout growth and cause fewer flowers to develop. It also destroys the beautiful winter branch structure on crape myrtle trees.

The most pruning that will need to be done on crape myrtles is to remove the “suckers” or water sprouts that may develop along the lower portions of main stems or from the roots. If pruning is necessary to improve the plant’s shape or form, it can be done any time after the leaves have fallen. Plants are easy to prune while dormant since the branch structure is readily visible without foliage. Tip pruning to remove old flower clusters is acceptable on small plants, but is not practical for large plants or low maintenance landscapes. Tip pruning can promote recurrent blooming of some cultivars. A good rule to follow when pruning crape myrtles is not to cut any branch larger than the diameter of a pencil.

If you severely prune the crape myrtle in your landscape because you want the tree to remain a certain size, consider selecting a variety that will only grow to the height you prefer. Crape myrtles are available in a wide assortment of sizes, forms, and colors. Depending on the cultivar, they range in size from groundcovers, under four feet tall, to trees, larger than twenty feet tall and come in single or multi-stemmed specimens. Their colors vary from shades of white, pink, and red to lavender and purple. Reds seem to be some of the most popular with cultivars named Dynamite, Siren Red, and Red Rocket.

For best results and minimum maintenance, choose a cultivar, which has growth characteristics and a mature size that will fit the intended landscape use. Misplacement of any plant, including crape myrtles, will require constant pruning to keep it from outgrowing its place.

Crape myrtles are well adapted to the climate in Central Florida. They are drought tolerant and require little fertilizer. However, when provided with fertilizer and water, they will respond with lush growth. Full sun is necessary for best flowering and for best branch development.

The most common pest of crape myrtles is the crape myrtle aphid (*Tinocallis kahawaluokalani*). With a piercing-sucking mouthpart, aphids drink the sap from the leaves and secrete a sticky honeydew substance, which sooty mold (*Capnodium* species) develops. The sooty mold is a fungus, which is not damaging to the plant, but a sign that the plant is infested with aphids, which are damaging to the plant.

A number of species and cultivars of crape myrtles are susceptible to a white, powdery fungus called powdery mildew (*Erysiphe lagerstroemiae*). Powdery mildew causes leaves, stems and flowers to become distorted, stunted and drop. It is prevalent in shady, humid locations and cool nights. The best defense against this disease is to select species and cultivars that are resistant to powdery mildew.

So, the next time you see the pollarded crape myrtles, don't rush home to prune yours in the same manner. This excess labor is unnecessary and your crape myrtle will actually have more blooms if you do not prune this severe. For more information on pruning and answers to other gardening questions, please call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to answer your gardening questions Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm.