

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ATTRACTIVE NATURAL CRAPEMYRTLES

Many trees often get **SEVERELY TOPPED**, when careful thinning would really give them better appearance, take far less work, and, in many instances, would help the trees live many years longer.

Please, let the NC Cooperative Extension Service, an educational agency of NC State University teach you **WITH A FREE LESSON** on proper methods of pruning crapemyrtles if you wish. Call 252-338-3954 in Pasquotank County to arrange this.

Topped trees can be disfigured by a great number of **HEADING** cuts. Heading cuts shorten limbs back somewhere along their length. This means that dozens of limbs look hacked back, cut off squarely at abrupt ends. Sometimes all the limbs are cut off at the same height, looking as though a table top could be laid across the sawed off ends of the limbs. Other times, the squared off ends might stop at different heights, resembling long stubs of an old-fashioned wooden hat rack, with or without a central trunk.

Decades of research discourages the practice of heading back trees, except in the cases of fruit bearing trees, which are short-lived, aren't meant to have a natural form, and have to be short and stubby to support the weight of heavy fruit loads on their shortened limbs. Ornamental trees, such as crape myrtles, and larger shade trees should be pruned with many more **THINNING** cuts than heading cuts. Thinning cuts are made **ONLY AT THE BASE** of limbs where those limbs originate from larger limbs or larger trunks of trees.

After many THINNING CUTS are made, people passing by may barely notice that pruning has just happened. After HEADING CUTS are made, trees look wholly changed and noticeably altered. In some instances this is desired, as in pollarding.

Most people can learn to make properly positioned thinning cuts within 5 minutes, by witnessing a demonstration of the technique. Such demonstrations will be offered by appointment for small groups at the NC Cooperative Extension Center at the address below. Call the phone number listed below to set appointments to learn how to prune.

With more thinning cuts, and fewer heading cuts made each winter, our region's trees will look more natural, may survive longer, and will take less effort to prune. Professional crews that normally perform the topping of many trees can stay employed all winter removing litter, clearing clogged culverts and controlling more winter weeds. These three tasks could use more attention in northeastern North Carolina to improve property values, better beautify our communities and strengthen our image.

Crape Myrtle Pruning

We often use crape myrtles in the landscape because they bloom all summer long. We also value them for their peeling bark, fall color and the grace of their natural form. It is as tough as it is beautiful.



Well pruned crape myrtle with natural form
Karen Russ, ©HGIC, Clemson Extension

The practice of chopping off the tops of crape myrtle has become very commonplace. Many people believe that it is required to promote flowering; some prune because the plant is too large for the space provided; others see their neighbors doing it and feel the need to follow suit. There are some instances in which heavy pruning is necessary, but light pruning is usually all that is needed. The type and amount of pruning depends on the desired shape and size of the plant.

Crape myrtle can be a low-maintenance plant, and the best way to ensure this is to choose the cultivar that best suits your landscape needs before planting. There are many new cultivars in different sizes and colors. The dwarf (3 to 6 feet) and semi-dwarf (7 to 15 feet) selections now available make it easy to choose the right size plant for a certain space.



Results of "topping" a crape myrtle
Karen Russ, ©HGIC, Clemson Extension

Crape myrtles that mature between 5 and 15 feet include 'Acoma' (white flowers), 'Hopi' (light pink), 'Comanche' (dark pink), 'Zuni' (lavender) and 'Tonto' (red). These are also resistant to powdery mildew, a fungus that attacks and distorts the leaves. Compact crape myrtles between 3 and 6 feet include 'Hope' (white), 'Ozark Spring' (lavender) and 'Victor' (red). Unfortunately, the compact crape myrtles are not resistant to powdery mildew.

If careful consideration is given to the projected size of the mature plant, a selection can be found that

will not outgrow its boundaries and can be allowed to display its graceful beauty with minimal pruning. Crape myrtle does not require heavy pruning to promote bloom. Flowers are produced on new growth. It will produce flowers without any pruning, although it will produce larger flowers and bloom more profusely if at least lightly pruned. Pruning in late winter or early spring will stimulate vigorous new growth in the spring. Encourage a second bloom in summer by pruning flowers immediately after they fade.

This plant prefers hot, sunny climates and in South Carolina will grow to tree-size proportions. It is important that tree types are 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 whacking off their tops.

To develop a tree shape, remove all limbs growing from ground level except the three to five strongest limbs. As the tree matures, remove lower, lateral branches ("limbing up") one-third to halfway up the height of the plant. Remove branches that are crossing or rubbing against each other and shoots growing into the center of the canopy. Make your cuts to a side branch or close to the trunk. Head back wayward and unbranched limbs. As it 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 is being pruned or not. Pull these out when succulent instead of pruning them.

You may feel the need to improve the appearance by removing the seed heads in late winter or early spring before growth begins. This is recommended only if they are within reach. Once this becomes a tall, mature plant, allow nature to take its course - the seeds will drop, the plant will bloom, and the natural grace of the plant has been retained.

Consider all your options when confronted with a large, old crape myrtle in a space meant for a different shaped tree or shrub. To create clearance under the canopy, limb up old trees that have spread their lower limbs where they interfere with people

or cars. Limb up above the roofline of a single story home to clear obstruction of a window or door. Eliminate one of the major trunks if it is leaning too close to a building. Only as a last result should you top a beautiful, old specimen 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. As mentioned earlier, the best way to maintain a crape myrtle at a particular size is to plant a known cultivar that will mature at the desired height and spread.

If you have a crape myrtle in a spot where you want a low, compact plant, you have two options: (1) Dig it up and plant a new dwarf cultivar that will require little or no maintenance; (2) Prune the stems back to about six inches above the ground each year. Severe pruning will not kill or injure a healthy crape myrtle.

Practice corrective pruning to remove defective or dead branches. This should be done at the time the problem is detected. Otherwise, prune to remove lateral branches, small twigs or branches in the center to create more open space for sun and air movement while the plant is dormant (winter or early spring).

Excerpted from the *South Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual*, EC 678.

Prepared by Bob Polonski, Extension Consumer Horticulturist, and Debbie Shaughnessy, HGIC Information Specialist, Clemson University. (New 01/99. Images added 11/06.)

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.