

Crape Myrtles

By Jane and Ray McGowen

Who doesn't love crape myrtles? They are hardy, adaptable, low maintenance shrubs/trees that come in a variety of sizes, heights and colors. Unlike the various flowering trees that bloom for a week (maybe two) in the spring, the crape myrtle blooms for several weeks in the heat of the Texas summer, and is often characterized as the "100-day bloomer." Lavish clouds of white, pink, red, or purple (to name a few) flowers start blooming in June and maintain their palette of color throughout our landscape until the fall - provided they have exposure to lots of sun. If they are planted in the shade they will produce fewer flowers.

One of the first things people consider when planting a crape myrtle is the color of the flower. While that is definitely important, it is more essential to consider the mature size of the tree in relation to where it will be planted. A crape myrtle needs to be located where it can grow to its fullest height without restriction, and should NEVER be chopped to keep it in bounds. Rather, it should be planted in a spot that will accommodate its full, natural growth.

Crape myrtles come in a variety of sizes, which should be carefully considered before planting:

- 1) Miniature (2-3 feet)
- 2) Dwarf (3-6 feet)
- 3) Semi-dwarf (5-12 feet)
- 4) Large shrub/small tree (10-20 feet)
- 5) Tree (20+ feet)

After choosing the correct size tree for its location, then the selection of flower color follows. We recommend that one chooses from the powdery mildew-resistant varieties that are named for Native American Tribes, such as Natchez, Catawba, Sioux, Chickasaw or Comanche to name a few.

The best time to plant a crape myrtle is in the fall or early spring. However, many people choose to plant them in summer while they are blooming, to ensure the color of the flower. If planted during the Texas summer heat, be sure to water frequently while the tree establishes its roots.

DO'S AND DONT'S FOR YOUR CRAPE MYRTLES:

- 1) Always plant in full sun with good air circulation.
- 2) When first planted, provide additional water until the tree has established itself. This can take several months, so monitor the soil carefully.

- 3) Prune suckers that grow from the base of the tree at ground level. This can be done any time of the year, and keeps the tree manicured.
- 4) Deadhead the old blooms (if you can reach them)
- 5) NEVER chop a crape myrtle to keep it in bounds, and NEVER EVER top a crape myrtle. Many people believe that topping will create more blooms, but in fact, it ruins the natural shape of the tree. It also promotes multiple shoots that grow from the cut-back point, resulting in heavy blossoms which may cause the branches to split or break in heavy winds or rains.

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale (CMBS)

Unfortunately for those of us that love crape myrtles, not all the news is good. An invasive species of insect, the CMBS, was first discovered in Texas in 2004 and now has spread throughout the South. Most often, the first sign of CMBS is a black sooty mold on the tree bark. Upon closer examination the small white or grey felt-like insect may be noticed near pruning sights and branch crotches of more mature wood. While CMBS may not kill the crape myrtle, without treatment the blooms will be greatly reduced and the tree deformed. At first suspicious sighting it is very important to begin a treatment regimen that may include washing with soap and water, spraying with dormant oil in the winter, or likely it will require systemic soil drench. For the most current CMBS horticulture advice, we found this site to be very helpful: <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/crapemyrtle-bark-scale>. Otherwise, an arborist, a highly qualified nursery person or quality lawn maintenance professional should be consulted as soon as possible.



