

Severe Pruning of Crapemyrtles an Ugly, Foolish Practice

Shane Harris

Question: Throughout our area, I see some crape myrtles trimmed back hard and ugly and some left untouched and beautiful. Which method is correct?

Answer: Oh, you hit a nerve. The thing that really gripes me each winter is seeing crape myrtles that are pruned wrong -- butchered back and abused. Many tall, beautiful crape myrtles are being reduced to nothing but ugly stubs. This improper pruning technique once described by *Southern Living* magazine as "Crape Murder," involves severely pruning back crape myrtles from tree form to shrub form. Whacking back crape myrtles off at about 4 feet high to leave only the three to five main trunks is an ugly and foolish practice. I don't like, see no reason for it and would never recommend it.

Here are the facts on how to correctly prune crape myrtles:

Crape myrtles tend to grow numerous suckers from its base, and therefore do require some pruning every year -- but only minimal pruning. Early training will help eliminate any extensive pruning later on. Extensive pruning or cutting back of crape myrtles each year only causes them to vigorously grow back what was removed. The only pruning that should be done each year is to remove suckers and to maintain its attractive shape by removing deadwood and seedpods. And heavy pruning in the winter will not help or force crape myrtles to bloom more.

The only way to stimulate more summer flowering and promote a smaller second flush of blooms is to tip-prune -- also known as deadheading -- the old blossoms at the ends of the branches as they fade in late summer. A crape myrtle that is not blooming well might be getting too much shade and should be moved to another area to get more direct sunlight. Moving it into more sunlight will also help control powdery mildew.

If you think a crape myrtle needs to be pruned, do it only during middle to late winter once the leaves have fallen and

the tree is completely dormant. One rule of thumb to pruning crape myrtles -- don't cut to see over it; cut to see through it. Remember that crape myrtles are trees and are supposed to get tall. Shaping the tree, removing the lower limbs and having only three to five main trunks will give the crape myrtle a more attractive and formal appearance.

Renewal pruning or cutting a plant back to the ground is sometimes a good idea. If a crape myrtle has been severely damaged, unhealthy, or pruned badly, renewal pruning will allow the plant to start all over. Renewal pruning will cause a crape myrtle to grow back rapidly in about two to three years. Once the crape myrtle has grown back, the plant can then be trained and properly pruned to look even better. Do all renewal pruning in March.

Crape myrtle varieties come in all shapes, colors and sizes. Pruning large ones into small ones doesn't make sense. If you want a small, manageable crape myrtle that looks like a shrub, buy a smaller variety. Whacking off and scarring up large crape myrtles each year serves no purpose.

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