

OUT ON A LIMB

(Crapemyrtles)

By: Roger Davis, Landscape Architect
Davis Design Group, Augusta, Georgia

Since this article was published in the 'M D Journal', let's talk about death; no actually murder; "Crape murder" that is, a phrase coined by 'Southern Living' in their magazine some years ago.

Before you prune a Crapemyrtle or any plant, first ask yourself these questions, "Why am I pruning this plant" and "What do I hope to achieve when I'm finished"? Most people mindlessly whack on these beautiful trees but wouldn't think of doing the same thing to an Oak or Dogwood. When I ask people why they prune crapemyrtles back to a nub the typical response is because "We thought we had to make it bloom" or "I thought we were supposed to" or "Everyone else does" or "The tree is too large". There is no good reason to 'pollard' (top) a crapemyrtle. When a crapemyrtle is 'topped' in this manner the tree is forced to send out multiple limbs from the prune which creates a 'broom' appearance. These new 'whisk' type limbs are too weak to properly support the bloom of the upcoming season and creates a 'weeping' condition that often impedes the ability to walk or view under the canopy. 'Topping' also ruins the magnificent winter structural silhouette which should be one of the main reasons for planting the tree in the first place. If planted in the proper place, crapemyrtles produce large amounts of bloom without pruning. If your crapemyrtle is not blooming, it is most likely in too much shade and pruning will not force it to bloom no matter how much you cut it back. The solution would be to relocate the plant to a sunny location. If the crapemyrtle is too large for the current location, cutting it back is not the solution but relocating it to a proper location is more appropriate. Crapemyrtles are very resilient and in most cases can be successfully relocated. I am not suggesting that you never prune, just prune judiciously. Prune out entire limbs to help elevate the canopy so the view is eventually through the major trunks and under the canopy. Prune out smaller canes from the base to promote a 3, 5 or 7 cane tree instead of a large bushy type tree. Many Crape can be obtained as 'standards' meaning a single trunk. Before planting a crape myrtle always consider the mature height and spread expectancy. There are countless varieties to choose from with mature height expectancies from 3 feet to 40 feet.

Did you know that the most common white flowering crapemyrtle (Natchez) grows to a height of 30' or more? This is a beautiful cultivar, if left alone with only structural pruning. It has cinnamon-brown bark, pure white flowers and has a bloom period of about 110 days starting in mid-June. I see this tree used in locations where a tree of a maximum of 12' in height would have been much better.

There are new cultivars on the market which are small deciduous shrubs and not trees at all. They are the 'Razzle Dazzle' series with a maximum height of 3' and a range of colors from cherry red, pink to white. So if you want a crapemyrtle that you can prune, on, select one of the Razzle Dazzle series and hack away.

If your crapemyrtle has been murdered by an over zealous pruner, a quick Internet search will provide numerous articles on 'crape murder', proper pruning, renovation pruning and sources for characteristics of crapemyrtle varieties. Select the proper variety, select the proper pruning technique and help stop "crape murder". It's a serious crime.

It's that time of year when we can ride all over City and witness the mass mutilation of these wonderful trees. Maybe a more fitting name, rather than 'crape murder' should be 'crape rape'. Either way it should be a punishable offense.

I urge you to please preserve our beautiful crapemyrtles and allow them to grow in their natural form.