

Newspaper Column

Question: I saw my neighbor pruning her crape myrtles recently. Can you prune in the summer and why would she do this?

Answer: Summer pruning of crape myrtles can be done and is done for a couple reasons. The first, is to try and get two or more bloom cycles per summer. Crape myrtles bloom on new growth and therefore we can take advantage of this characteristic to get multiple bloom cycles on the earlier blooming cultivars. This does not work very well on varieties that bloom after mid-July. With this type pruning all you do is cut off the spent blooms as soon as they start to fade. You can remove about half of the total blooms and then come back in a week or two and remove the rest. Using this method you can have nice blooms for two or three times as long as normal.

The other reason to summer prune is to slow growth of an overly vigorous tree. This can be accomplished by making several thinning out cuts within the tree canopy. Summer is also a good time to remove the vigorous suckers that shoot out near the base or near last winters pruning cuts. If you have a tree that has outgrown the area its planted in you may want to use this option because winter pruning just encourages more vigorous growth. Do not use this type pruning later than mid August and it is best to make mostly thinning out cuts rather than heading back cuts. Heading back cuts are the type you see the roadway maintenance crews doing in the winter. This is the worst way to prune a crape myrtle whether in summer or winter.

This 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 rare situations 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.

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, most of 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.