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For Publication

From time to time (ok, almost daily about this time of year) I get asked the question “when and how do I prune my crape myrtles”. Whenever I get asked this question, I never fail to remember an incident that happened several years ago back home in Holly Pond.

In my nearly fourteen years as a County Extension Agent, I have been involved in just about as many different things as is possible.... Everything from calf shows and 4-H club meetings to digging grubworms in pastures to transporting five gallon containers of fire ants to Starkville Mississippi. No matter what the circumstance is, however, I usually draw the line at getting involved in domestic disputes of any significant nature.

Well as you might have already guessed, there was one time when involvement just couldn't be avoided. The dispute was a very heated one which very nearly gapped up a family to an extent which hasn't been witnessed since the famous Hatfield verses McCoy incident. I will always remember that February afternoon as an extremely calm day..... that is until IT happened.

I heard a faint knock at the door of my parents' house, and when I opened it I saw a familiar face. It was the then ten-year-old daughter of my parents' next door neighbor. She simply stated “my mom and dad sent me to get you”! At this point I wasn't sure if this were a statement or a threat, but I knew that somehow I was involved... so I followed her.

In all my years of “county agent” training, nothing prepared me for what was to happen next. On one side of the driveway the little girl's mother stood angrily over some sticks of wood protruding from the ground, which I recognized from the bark to be crapemyrtles. Her face was as red as the blooms which had adorned these flowering shrubs during the past summer. I was sure glad I wasn't the one who had made her look like that! All she could get out was (and I'll paraphrase) “Danny, you're a county agent... you go and tell my husband how he has destroyed the beauty of my crapemyrtles by cutting them down, and he probably killed them in the process. She didn't even call his first name, so I knew right away the situation was bad.

Her husband, the girl's father, was standing on the other side of the driveway with pruning loppers still in hand (so much for his alibi I thought). His version of the story went like this.... "Danny, since you are a county agent, you go and explain to my wife that crapemyrtles will get very tall and must be cut down along the driveway and besides the only way to get them to bloom is to cut them down.

It was obviously time for a little education for my former next-door-neighbors. Crapemyrtles flower best when pruned annually because they flower only on new growth. The plants can be pruned anytime during late winter or early spring before the new growth begins, without the loss of any future flower buds. Pruning increases flower production because it stimulates vigorous new growth. Fortunately, all parties seemed to agree on this, so far so good.

Old plants which are not pruned usually produce smaller blooms which are of less quality. Removing old flower heads or blooms after they fade will stimulate new growth and another flush of blooms in late summer for many early season blooming cultivars. Care should be taken when this is done as it can lead to diminished cold hardiness and increased winter damage should we receive an early freeze.

Crapemyrtles can actually be pruned in just about any fashion. I personally think they are more desirable in their natural tree form for small or accent trees. To develop a tree shape, remove all limbs and sprouts growing from the ground level except three to five main limbs. Cut off all side branches half way up the height of the plant, or even higher if you desire. Maintain your yearly pruning program in this manner and try heading them back during the late winter.

Very low compact plants can be obtained by severely pruning the crapemyrtles back to within six inches of the ground. Severe pruning will not injure or kill a healthy plant as long as it is done before the new spring growth begins. (Score one for the husband, not that it mattered). Severe pruning can, however, diminish the natural character and form of crapemyrtles. Severe pruning at the same level year after year can also lead to the formation of galls or callused areas at the site of the cut, but will not harm them.

Many people are surprised to learn that there are so many varieties of crapes from which to choose. Colors can range from reds, corals, and pinks to lavenders, purples, and whites. There is even a new Arkansas release called "Dynamite" that is a true red color. They have a variety of different growth patterns and characteristics which makes each variety different and special.

Crapes come in different sizes (a fact which surprised my neighbors). Crapes come in dwarf varieties which typically grow 3-5 feet, semi-dwarf which are 5-10 feet, medium which are 10-20 feet, and tree sized varieties which can grow to heights of much more than 20 feet. Some varieties such as Natchez (a white flowering crape myrtle with wonderful cinnamon colored bark) can even reach heights of up to 30-40 feet. If you have to severely cut back your crapemyrtle every year to make it fit the location in which it is growing, you probably have the wrong cultivar growing there. Some cultivars are even resistant to powdery mildew, one of the most common disease problems that affect them.

As everyone now knows, crapes are like a magnet for Japanese Beetles. Some new studies are now underway to evaluate which (if any) varieties are less attractive to the highly destructive beetles that will no doubt be coming our way in early June.

Crapemyrtles can grow in a fairly wide range of soil conditions and can tolerate soil pH's from as low as 5.2 to as high as 6.5. They also have a relatively low fertilizer requirement. A soil test is recommended to determine fertility requirements. A complete garden fertilizer such as 8-8-8 or 13-13-13 are ideal for crapemyrtles. Also a 12-6-6 grade sold commonly as "Nurseryman's Special" will work fine. For small plants, apply one teaspoon monthly from March until August. Larger plants will require from one to two tablespoons monthly from May to August during their first year. Established plants should receive about two cups in March and again in June.

Whether one crapemyrtle is planted by itself or if they are planted in mass, crapes are beautiful additions to most any full-sun areas of your landscape. They will always be a favorite here in our area because of their colorful flowers, handsome bark, and their adaptivity. My congratulations also goes out to the Walker County Master Gardeners who are responsible for the installation and maintenance of the showy crapemyrtles which can be seen along Highway 78 during the summertime!

If you would like more information (or if it will help prevent other family squabbles like my neighbor's) you can contact the Walker County Extension Office and ask for your free copy of publication ANR 1083 "Common Crapemyrtle".