

Crape Myrtle Trimming

By: Melinda Sperl

Crape Myrtles are often mistaken as trees when they really are only shrubs. This distinction is partly because they have multiple trunks yet some of their species grows up to 30 feet tall. Trees are in a totally different classification of plants than shrubs. Differences in species are that trees should only be trimmed in the winter when the sap is NOT flowing to discourage insects that are attracted to their sap, like bark beetles. Shrubs, like crape myrtles, can freeze if trimmed in the cold temperatures so you would not want to trim them in the winter.

Then with Crape Myrtles there is the habit of “Crape Murder” where they are trimmed off in the same place year after year. This will create a knob on the branch where it is cut again and again. This knob creates scar tissue on the branch restricting the flow of energy to the end of the branch which will stop that tree from growing, blooming and in turn becoming more prone to insects and disease.

A question I have been asked many times is how do you properly trim a Crape Myrtle? This is a complicated question with many factors. I can only break down a couple basic ones:

1. If your crape has already been “murdered” for many years and is large, then you must be careful how you take care of this. Each time you cut on of the branches new branches will be created. If you cut below that old ugly knob you would then have several new branches created which would maybe not be where you want your new height of this plant growing. This is why people start giving up on their Crape and end up just cutting it again and again in the same place. If all the old knobs are cut out you also stand the chance of losing the entire plant. Remember the 1/3 rule. Caution is good here if you want to save this plant.
2. A second option in this mature tree is to cut one of those knobs just to start new growth. I actually did this with an old plant that I replanted in my yard. Then, because you started new growth happening, you will also get new growth from the root ball. All plants want a leader shoot. This is the new plant that will act and the main branch to take over for the one that you just cut. Let that one grow if it is in a good place. This is normal for a Crape because they are shrubs and will constantly give you a new branch from the bottom. If you don’t like the one you have, let this one grow, cut the old one and move on. You sure can’t do that with a tree! The ones that you don’t want just prune them away from the base of the plant each year. On this mature crape do this one or maybe two times per year and within a few years you would never know it was murdered at all!

Now, new crape owners. Yours did not come from the nursery “murdered” so please trim it the way it is now. Only trim it the same as you would a tree or any large shrub. Trim inside branches that are crossing that will eventually grow together. Remember that those tiny branches that are now crossing, when they grow large they will grow big! Cut them. Anything that is growing on your house, on a house or another plant should be pruned. If you want to trim off the old blooms from last year you may but this is not necessary as they will still bloom.

Happy Gardening!

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