



Tree Conservation Notes

Athens-Clarke County Community Tree Program

DON'T TOP CRAPEMYRTLES!

The Proper Care and Pruning of a Favorite Tree

Introduction

Crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) is a valuable addition to our landscape in Clarke County. Originally brought to the United States from China and Korea in 1747, crapemyrtles have become very popular over the last 20 or more years. The U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. has bred crapemyrtles extensively, and now many varieties are available including dwarf and pest resistant varieties.

While some people consider crapemyrtle to be a small tree, others prefer to call it a shrub. The tree *does* fit the “official” definition of a tree—a perennial, woody plant that achieves a trunk diameter of at least 3 inches and a height of at least 15 feet. The typical crapemyrtle has multiple trunks, but standard forms are grown to have a single stem.

Crapemyrtles provide exciting color, texture, and form in the landscape. The large clusters of white, pink, red, or lavender flowers are intense bursts of color atop the green summer foliage. The exfoliating (peeling) bark and sinuous stems create added interest in both the summer and winter. The trees are deciduous, losing their leaves in the fall, and the fall color is often brilliant orange and red.

Crapemyrtle grows best in a hot, dry climate and a fertile, well-drained loam. In our area it is very tolerant of sun, heat, and urban conditions. Crapemyrtles are relatively hardy and pest-free, but sooty mold and powdery mildew can be a problem on some varieties. ***By far the most common problem that befalls our crapemyrtles is the “topping” they experience at the hands of well-meaning but misinformed owners and landscape maintenance personnel.***

Proper Pruning of Crapemyrtles

Do not top crapemyrtles! Tree topping is not an acceptable pruning method. Topping is the indiscriminate removal of limbs at an arbitrary point between the nodes (points of attachment of branches and leaves) to obtain a predetermined height (see Figure 1). Limbs should only be removed at their point of attachment, where they meet the next

branch, with no stubs left (see Figure 2). Topping—of crapemyrtles or any other tree-- results in limb and trunk decay, structural defects, and a reduction in tree health and beauty. It also causes tree decline that often leads to death. It encourages sprouting, and upsets a tree's natural balance between the crown (leaves and limbs) and roots.

Which Crapemyrtle Do You Prefer?



Figure 1. Topped crapemyrtles.



Figure 2. A well-pruned crapemyrtle.

Why People Top Trees

Topping is commonly done to many types and sizes of trees, but is especially common for crapemyrtles, trees that are widely planted throughout the County on residential and commercial sites, public and private property, and along our roadways. There are several reasons commonly given by people for why they top these trees.

One reason is that the tree has grown taller than its owner expected it to and is outgrowing the space it was planted in. Topping is then used to dramatically reduce a tree's size. Another common reason given for topping is to promote blooming. The sprouts that the tree produces from each stem to recover from topping will have many flower buds since crapemyrtles flower on the current year's growth. Also, as these trees get taller, owners feel that they cannot see the blooms as well and therefore top the trees to keep blooms at eye level. *It is also commonly known that some people top their*

crapemyrtles (and other trees) simply because they saw others doing it, someone told them it's a good thing to do, or they incorrectly perceive the flush of new growth after topping as promoting tree vigor. In fact it is an energy demanding response to the loss of leaves and limbs.

There is no good reason to top a crapemyrtle, or any tree. First, if you want to reduce the size of a tree or shrub, there is an accepted pruning technique called crown reduction pruning that will reduce tree height. Where trees and infrastructure are in conflict, topping is used to provide clearance. However, eventually, one or the other will have to go for the conflict to be resolved. Otherwise, the tree, and probably the infrastructure too, will require an increased amount of maintenance.

Crapemyrtle Selection and Care

When selecting a new tree or crapemyrtle variety to plant, make sure you know what the average mature height of the tree will be, and locate the tree in a place where it will have adequate room to grow to that size. Some crapemyrtles can grow as tall as 40-45 feet and will become a medium-sized tree; they should not be planted beneath utility lines. There is an extensive listing of crapemyrtle cultivars in Michael A. Dirr's "Manual of Woody Landscape Plants".

There are some new introductions of crapemyrtle that have been bred for disease resistance, good flowering, and ornamental bark. Some crapemyrtle varieties are semi-dwarf and grow to be only 12 to 15 feet tall at maturity. *Lagerstroemia fauriei*, introduced in the 1950's, is a large maturing species (35-50 feet in height) and has a rusty brown bark. Crosses between *L. indica* and *L. fauriei* are high quality plants with attractive bark; they grow to be 20 - 25 feet in height.

To insure abundant blossoms, maintain the health of your tree. Mulch it, provide irrigation when rainfall is inadequate, and protect your tree from wounds, insects, and diseases. Insect and disease problems on crapemyrtles include powdery mildew, black spot, sooty mold, aphids, and scale.

For more information, contact the Athens-Clarke County Community Forestry Coordinator at (706)613-3561 voice, (706)613-3566 fax, or by e-mail at forester@athensclarkecounty.com