

Crape myrtles are probably the most popular flowering landscape tree in Louisiana. These trees are commonly called the “Flower of the South” and go by the scientific name of *Lagerstroemia*, which has several species. Crape myrtles can be used as specimen plants, patio plants, container-grown ornamentals, small landscape trees or street trees.

Summer flowers are characteristic, but crape myrtles also are known for trunk coloration, foliage color and peeling bark. Trunk color can be spectacular and ranges from light greenish-gray to dark red. Some cultivars have bark that peels or exfoliates in long strands, exposing various colors and creating mottled patterns of light and dark that enhance fall and winter landscapes. Fall foliage can range from brilliant yellow to deep mahogany.

Crape myrtles are hardy through USDA hardiness zone 7 (0-10 degrees F). Most are hardy in Louisiana, but some terminal dieback can occur during harsh winters.

Mature sizes can be classified as miniature, dwarf, semi-dwarf, medium and tall. All crape myrtles should be grouped into one of these categories. Miniature crape myrtles reach heights of 2 to 3 feet; dwarf, semi-dwarf, medium and tall crape myrtles reach heights of 5 to 6 feet, 10 to 12 feet, 15 feet and more than 20 feet, respectively.

Planting

Crape myrtles have a shallow, fibrous root system and are long lived. For best performance, plant in a sunny location that has good air circulation and a well-drained soil. In partial shade, flowering will be reduced and plants are more susceptible to leaf spot disease.

A wide range of soils is manageable for crape myrtles. A pH of 5.5 to 6.5 is ideal. It is important to have good internal and surface drainage.

Dig a planting hole for crape myrtles twice as wide and the same depth as the original root ball. For best results, plant during the dormant season, and use container-grown plants. Do not amend backfill soil with organic matter (peat moss, pine bark, etc.).

Irrigation may be necessary during the first growing season, especially for larger plants and

if crape myrtles were planted during the active growing season. Water deeply to encourage good root system establishment into the surrounding native soil.

Mulches help crape myrtle performance. Pine straw is a great mulch that conserves soil moisture, decreases weed pressure, protects against “weed eater” disease and is aesthetically pleasing.

When transplanting larger crape myrtles, you may need to stake these trees for the first growing season. They have a shallow root system. Wind, rain and related factors can easily uproot plants prior to re-establishment in a new planting site. Be sure to remove stakes as soon as an adequate root system is established. Under no circumstances should a tree be staked for longer than one year.

Fertilization

Follow soil sample recommendations when fertilizing. Generally, crape myrtles benefit from an annual application of 8-8-8, 13-13-13 or a slow-release fertilizer. Apply in early spring. For single trees in an established lawn area, apply fertilizer in holes drilled in the soil at the tree dripline (canopy edge). For trees in established landscape beds, apply fertilizer in drilled holes or broadcast over the top of the soil. Crape myrtles are heavy fertilizer feeders, but they don’t necessarily require high levels of fertilizer to flower well.

Pruning

One of the best features of crape myrtles is the natural growth habit. Frequently, improper pruning destroys this desirable aspect. Use a selective method of pruning (thinning out the plant canopy) to achieve the best growth habit.

For tree form specimens, remove all suckers at the base of the plant each winter. It is a must to retain all the major trunks. Also remove any weak, crowded limbs in the center of the plant canopy to provide an open growth habit that allows air circulation and sunlight penetration.

A unique characteristic of many new crape myrtle varieties is the trunk. It frequently has excellent color and exfoliating (peeling) bark. Prune to enhance these features.

Pruning of bloom clusters when flowers fade may produce additional and prolonged flowering. This is time consuming. It may be practical for homeowners, but it’s not commercially justifiable for landscape professionals. Also, heavy bloom clusters produced on vigorous shoots resulting from excessive spring growth can make a plant top heavy and cause limbs to break. Pruning of these bloom clusters can protect the plant form and growth habit.

Failure to Flower

One of the problems occasionally encountered by homeowners is the lack of flowers. Possible reasons for lack of flowering include:

- Excessive shade. Crape myrtles require 8 hours of full sun daily for optimum flowering.
- Variety. Some varieties don’t flower as vigorously as others
- Heavy aphid infestation. Aphids are common insect feeders on crape myrtles and can decrease flowering.
- Lack of fertilization. Crape myrtles require fertilization for new growth. If new growth doesn’t occur in the spring (because of nutrient depletion or cold weather), flowering may be greatly reduced.
- Improper pruning. Drastic pruning or pruning after new growth in the spring can delay summer flowering. Drastic pruning may promote excessive growth and less flowering.
- Overfertilization. Excessive fertilization in conjunction with other factors, primarily improper pruning, can eliminate or delay flowering.
- Leaf spot. Foliar diseases decrease plant vigor and flowering, especially where new growth is not produced in the spring.

Insects and Diseases

Major diseases found on crape myrtles in Louisiana are powdery mildew and *Cercospora* leaf spot. Powdery mildew is a fungus that reduces flowering and weakens the plant by attacking flower buds, terminal growth points and young leaves. Cool nights followed by warm, humid days favor development of powdery mildew. A grayish-white powdery growth is characteristic of this disease.

Cercospora leaf spot causes severe defoliation of several crape myrtle varieties in summer. It is prevalent during wet periods and causes black spots on foliage. Leaves turn yellow to reddish, and then defoliation occurs. Some varieties can experience up to 50% defoliation by mid-summer; the remaining leaves fall prematurely in September and October.

The primary insect pest of crape myrtles is aphids. Aphids, also called plant lice, suck sap from young tender plant tissue. Aphids also excrete a honeydew that is responsible for sooty mold growth on foliage. Spring through early summer are the typical times when aphids will be a problem in crape myrtles. For insect and disease control recommendations, consult your local county agent at a parish office of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

Recommended Varieties

Many new crape myrtle varieties are recommended for landscape plantings in Louisiana. Traditional varieties include Watermelon Red, William Toovey, Near East, Regal Red and several others. The table provides information on current varieties recommended for our growing conditions.

Variety	Flower Color	Mature Height	Comments
Acoma	White	12'-15'	Weeping habit; late June flowering
Basham's Party Pink	Pink	18'	Widely used pink; early-mid June flowering
Biloxi	Pale pink	25'	Gold fall foliage; early July flowering
Catawba	Violet purple	12'-15'	Mid-season flowering; some disease problems
Centennial Spirit	Red	18'	Excellent variety for Louisiana
Hardy Lavender	Med. lavender	20'	Disease problems; upright growth
Hope	White	4'-5'	Dwarf/semi-dwarf; early flowering
Hopi	Medium pink	6'-8'	Semi-dwarf, spreading habit; some disease resistance
Lipan	Med. lavender	15'	Some disease resistance; better than Hardy Lavender

Variety	Flower Color	Mature Height	Comments
Miami	Dark pink	20'	Upright, tall growth; exfoliating bark
Natchez	White	25'-30'	Tall growth habit; excellent for La.
Near East	Light pink	15'-18'	Medium, spreading growth; disease problems
Potomac	Clear pink	20'	Upright, tall growth; don't use in Louisiana (cold susceptible)
Regal Red	Dark red	15'-18'	Average performance mid- to late-season flowering
Sioux	Light purple	15'	Dense, upright growth; some disease resistance
Tuscarora	Coral pink	16'-18'	Mid-season flowering; excellent for La.
William Toovey	Pink red	15'-20'	Popular variety; some disease problems

Several varieties of miniature crape myrtles also are available at retail garden centers in late spring and summer. They include Baton Rouge (deep red), Bayou Marie (pink-red bicolor), Cordon Bleu (lavender), Delta Blush (pink), French Quarter (red), Houston (watermelon red), Lafayette (lavender/white), Mardi Gras (purple), New Orleans (purple), Deep Velvet (deep purple), Orlando (lavender), Pink Blush (light pink) and Sacramento (red).

Visit our Web site: www.lsuagcenter.com

Authors:

Dan Gill, Associate Professor (Horticulture)
Allen D. Owings, Associate Specialist (Horticulture)

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center

William B. Richardson, Chancellor
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station
David J. Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Pub. 1466

(5 M)

4/07 Rep.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

Crape Myrtles for Louisiana Landscapes

