Crape myrtle summer care

Crape myrtles are in full bloom, and judging by the number planted locally, they are among our most popular landscape plants. Thriving in hot weather, they are good choices for areas of the landscape that receive full sunlight. Under the right conditions, they flower all summer long.

Crape myrtle can be one of the most pest-free landscape plants with proper cultivar selection and placement in the landscape. There are only two disorders that are generally associated with crape myrtle. One is caused by a fungus, and the other is caused by an insect.

Powdery mildew first appears on new shoots as a whitish powder that later spreads to other plant parts. Powdery mildew causes the leaves, stems and flowers to become distorted and stunted. In severe cases, leaves may drop prematurely and flower buds may fail to open properly.

Shady, humid locations and cool nights encourage powdery mildew as does frequent wetting of the foliage by irrigation or rainfall.

The best way to manage powdery mildew on crape myrtle is to plant resistant cultivars. Crape myrtle cultivars with good to excellent resistance to powdery mildew include Tonto, Acoma, Hope, Pecos, Apalache, Centennial Spirit, Comanche, Hopi, Lipan, Near East, Osage, Sioux, Yuma, Biloxi, Miami, Natchez, Tuscarora, Tuskegee, and Twilight.

Because high humidity and a susceptible host are all that is required for powdery mildew to thrive, there will be situations in which fungicides will be needed. In general, you should apply fungicides when a powdery mildew infection starts. If the powdery mildew seems to be increasing, increase the frequency of fungicide application. Applications on 1 to 2-week intervals may be needed. Once you reduce the infection, decrease the frequency of fungicide application.
Many fungicides are labeled for use on crape myrtle. These may be sold to homeowners under many different names, so look for the following active ingredients: propiconazole, myclobutanil, tebuconazole, thiophanate-methyl, triforine and triadimefon. Rotate one active ingredient with another to help prevent resistance to fungicides. Read and follow all label directions carefully.

Crape myrtle aphid is another common pest, although the symptoms look much worse than any damage that is caused. It is host specific - meaning that it only feeds on crape myrtle. This insect is small and pale yellow in color. Feeding on the undersides of the foliage, it pierces individual leaves and sucks sap. Heavy infestations result in droplets of a sweet, sticky substance known as honeydew that drips and coats the upper sides of leaves. A mildew known as sooty mold grows in the honey dew and causes the leaves to become coated with a black, crusty material.

Sooty mold, though unattractive, does very little damage to most crape myrtles, and flowering is usually not reduced significantly because of it. In fact, studies have shown that crape myrtle aphid, and the associated sooty mold, attracts over thirty different kinds of beneficial insects.

The control of crape myrtle aphid will stop the further development of sooty mold. If control is necessary, use the mildest recommended insecticide that will do the job. Insecticidal soaps and horticultural oils for control of the aphid will also help to loosen and remove sooty mold.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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