

Friday's Feature

By

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### Stop the improper pruning of crape myrtles

A hideous crime is being committed in many landscapes—crape myrtles are being butchered. It happens this time every year when people improperly prune these beautiful plants. Many horticulturists call it “crape murder.”

The crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) is one of the most beautiful and popular flowering trees in Florida. Often called "the lilac of the South," this plant is tough, adaptable and showy. Its blooms are large and long-lasting and the tree has great fall color and attractive bark.

The practice of chopping off the tops of crape myrtles has become very commonplace. Many people believe that it is required to promote flowering, some prune because the plant is too large for the space provided, while others see their neighbors doing it and feel the need to follow suit. There may be some instances in which heavy pruning is necessary, but typically light pruning is all that is needed.



**Topping trees is a bad pruning practice**

Unfortunately, many homeowners and landscape professionals prune crape myrtle trees too severely. Topping, commonly called buck horning or dehorning, involves cutting stems back at an arbitrarily chosen height rather than pruning back to a bud, side branch, or main stem. Topping trees is harmful in many ways and regarded as an unacceptable practice by trained horticulturists and arborists. It can be very damaging and disfiguring to the tree.

Topping causes profuse growth at the site of the pruning, basal sprouting, and increases susceptibility to disease and insects. It encourages new growth that is too dense to allow air movement and light to reach the inner branches. Large, ugly "knobs" appear where trees have been trimmed repeatedly, and the topped tree has an unsightly appearance until new growth appears.

Although topping may result in larger blooms, those flowers will grow on thinner, weaker branches that

will droop, especially after a heavy rain, and may even break. Topping may also shorten the life of your trees.

To properly prune crape myrtles, use the following techniques.

- Remove suckers from the bottom of the plant.
- Remove crossed, damaged, or diseased branches. For crossed branches, remove the weaker of the two limbs that are crossing or rubbing.
- Prune the tips of the branches to remove old flowers. If old blooms are removed, a second blooming may occur.
- Thin out small twiggy growth to allow air to better circulate in the canopy.

Crape myrtle should be a low-maintenance plant. The best way to ensure this is to choose the cultivar that best suits your landscape needs before planting. There are many new cultivars in different sizes and colors. The dwarf (3 to 6 feet) and semi-dwarf (7 to 15 feet) selections now available make it easy to choose the right size plant for a certain space.

There's no telling how many thousands of dollars are wasted on incorrect pruning of crape myrtles. To be quite honest an unpruned crape myrtle is almost always superior in appearance to a "professionally" pruned one. Some things in nature are hard to improve on.

Spread the word among your friends and neighbors and eliminate crape murder. Use proper pruning techniques on your own trees, or ask your yard maintenance professionals about their pruning techniques. Remember to choose the appropriate size plant for the correct site, and prune very sparingly for beautiful crape myrtles in your yard.

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.



**Ugly, unnatural knobs result from improper pruning**

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