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# CRAPE MYRTLES

## MIGHTY MIRACLE SHOW OF 1000 DELIGHTS

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*Crape myrtles begin blooming in early July, keeps flowering through our blazing summers when everything else is fiery hot, and doesn't stop until the days begin to cool in early October.*

"I'm melting, "I'm melting," cries the Wicked Witch of the West near the end of The Wizard of Oz movie. I feel like that at the end of summer and my garden journal entries mostly include scribbled notes about how hot it is, how miserable I feel, and comments like "crape myrtle is the only thing in bloom this week" and "crape myrtle is flowering, not much else." *That's why I love this plant.*

"Going so soon? I wouldn't hear of it. Why my little party's just beginning," croons the Wicked Witch of the West. Crape myrtle is like a party that's just beginning, only a lot nicer and better looking than Wicked Witch.

Crape myrtle are dressed in pinks, lavenders, whites, and luscious reds. They begin blooming in early July, keeps flowering through our blazing summers when everything else is fiery hot, and doesn't stop until the days begin to cool in early October. But Wicked Witch is right; *crape myrtle's party is just beginning.*

Crape myrtle goes on to become one of the best fall foliage plants for our region with Technicolor shades of red, orange, and gold each autumn. And the party's still not over. Winter brings showy bark and attractive shapely form. And it's a water wise plant that is tolerant of drought.

The first step to enjoying crape myrtle is **selection**. Crape myrtle varieties come in multiple colors, sizes, and varying resistance to disease.

Those with Native American names like Catawba, Cherokee, Natchez, Muskogee, Seminole, Tuscarora, or others tend to be more resistant to powdery mildew, which can occasionally be an unsightly problem.

Crape myrtles like full sun and perform best with infrequent but deep watering after establishment. The trees sometimes need to be staked longer than other trees. Remove the stakes as soon as the trunk is sturdy enough to support the tree.

Crape myrtles bloom on new wood and should be pruned while dormant in winter or early spring by removing basal suckers and cleaning the twiggy growth and branches in the inner part of the plant to open it up and improve air circulation to the interior of the plant. If desired, remove side branches to a height of 4 or 5 feet, exposing the showy bark and attractive form.

After bloom, if you snip off the spent flower clusters, you will get a second but lighter bloom that goes on well into autumn.

**Powdery mildew** is the most common problem of crape myrtles in this area. Powdery mildew can be managed by choosing resistant varieties, planting crape myrtles in full sun, pruning to improve air circulation in the center

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of the plant, and avoiding excessive fertilization or irrigation which promote new growth that is susceptible to powdery mildew.

I love crape myrtles and like Dorothy says, "...if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard" because summer's most Mighty Miracle Show, the lovely crape myrtle, is already growing there.

## References

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