



## MEET THE CRAPE MYRTLE TREE

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

### Name:

The popular Crape Myrtle tree with its brilliant summer flower display is a tree that can cheer anyone who is heat weary! Crinkle-petaled blossoms cluster at branch tips and bloom for many weeks in shades of pink, purple, red, or white. This small, deciduous, long-lived tree also features dramatic fall color and interesting bark. They are not authentic myrtles—the myrtle name is due to their small leaf shape that resembles that of a true myrtle. "Crape" refers to the crinkly flowers that resemble crepe paper.

The genus name is attributed to Magnus von Lagerstroem (1696-1759), a Swedish merchant and naturalist. The species name, "*indica*" translates "of or from India," although this tree is native to a broad area of temperate and tropical Asia. Most Crape Myrtles in gardens are varieties of *Lagerstroemia indica* or hybrids of it and *Lagerstroemia fauriei* (Japanese Crape Myrtle).

### Interesting Facts:

- André Michaux (1746-1802), plant explorer and botanist to King Louis XVI, introduced *L. indica* into Charleston, South Carolina around 1786. It is among the first Asian plant introductions to America that proved suitable to the hot, humid southeastern climate. He established and maintained a botanical garden for ten years (1786-96) on 111 acres in North Charleston, South Carolina.
- For over 200 years *L. indica*, which is susceptible to powdery mildew in humid conditions, has been bred, resulting in numerous cultivars released. In the 1950's, John Creech, director of the U.S. National Arboretum, collected seeds from the Japanese crape myrtle, *L. fauriei*—noted for its upright form, smooth gray bark flakes with shiny cinnamon bark beneath, and highly mildew resistance. The U.S. National Arboretum crossed this seedling with the popular *L. indica*. The result was a profusion of hybrids, all given Native American names, such as 'Arapaho,' 'Hopi,' 'Natchez,' and 'Zuni.' They are mildew resistant with enhanced cold hardiness and beautiful bark, ranging from 8 feet to 25 feet tall.
- In Oklahoma during the mid-1990's, Dr. Carl Whitcomb raised over 65,000 seedlings from a single vividly flowered specimen of *L. indica*. After years of experimentation and a rigorous evaluation process, his introductions offer more vivid colors, including true red flowers, extended bloom time, and darkly hued foliage. Examples are: 'Dynamite' and 'Red Rocket,' both with red flowers and reaching 20 feet tall.
- Breeding of Crape Myrtles has continued with new, multiple series available—Petite Series, Filligree Series, Early Bird Series, Ebony Series, Dazzle Series, Barnyard Series, Magic Series, Enduring Summer Series. Four height categories now exist: miniature, dwarf, medium, and standard. The National Gardening Association currently lists approximately **440** Crape Myrtle cultivars in their plant database!

**Description:**

Our Master Gardener tree list—entitled "Ornamental Trees for Home Gardeners and Landscapes," describes the Crape Myrtle tree as slow to moderate growing with a rounded shape up to 25 feet tall and wide, with showy summer flowers. Small, medium to deep green leaves are often tinged red when young and turn shades of yellow, peach, vivid orange or red in the fall. Ebony Series features black leafed cultivars. Crape Myrtle is deciduous, meaning it drops all of its leaves in one season. These small leaves shed tidily and seem to disappear quickly. Cranberry-colored buds open to approximately 1-inch flowers gathered into foot-long dense clusters at branch tips. Batches of tiny round seed balls follow the flowers in early fall. Some specimens are multi-trunked, while others are single-stemmed. Smooth, attractively mottled, exfoliating bark expose smooth, pink-tinged inner bark creating a winter trunk and branches that look polished.

**Care:**

Plant fall through early spring in full sun. Heavy shade will reduce flower display and increase susceptibility to disease. Allow enough room for it to naturally develop its rounded crown. Crape Myrtle tree is adaptable to a wide range of soil types, but benefits from well-drained soil. Water deeply after planting, mulch, and water regularly until established. Starting the second spring, give this drought tolerant tree occasional deep watering.

The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates the Crape Myrtle tree as a "low water use" tree. The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California Landscapes at [www.ucanr.edu/site/WUCOLS](http://www.ucanr.edu/site/WUCOLS).

This tree grows fairly symmetrically. It is best to prune as little as possible once the framework or structure is determined. Excessive pruning, often dubbed as "crape murder," is unsightly and causes vigorous but weak growth that cannot support the large clusters of flowers. Since Crape Myrtles bloom on new wood, prune them in winter or early spring. Cut out broken, dead, and twiggy growth. Remove crossing branches to eliminate congestion in the interior of the tree to maintain good air circulation, which helps avoid powdery mildew. Select a resistant variety to also avoid powdery mildew.

The natural habit of Crape Myrtles is to produce multiple trunks. Choose three to five main trunks that have enough space to grow and are growing strongly straight. Trees with multiple trunks develop a wider canopy that supports a greater amount of blooms. Prune suckers and any additional trunks as close to the ground as possible. As the tree matures, removing the lower branches will reveal the interesting bark. If you don't need to walk under the branches or see through them, branching can start lower than the customary 6 to 8 feet from the ground.

With our lengthy summers, a second bloom can be achieved by cutting off the spent flowers of the first bloom. However, for winter interest and for food for birds, leave the last blooms on the tree to develop the small seed balls.

**Design Tips:**

Crape Myrtles are very versatile in the landscape and provide year round interest. However, due to its size and shape, it provides little shade, but the multi-trunked trees and shrubs can make a lovely screen. Crape Myrtle is



on the list of approved street trees of many local cities, partially due to the fact its roots don't damage sidewalks or structures. Use as a focal point in the front yard, entry, or in the view from a favorite window. Line one side of a long driveway, or on alternate sides of the driveway in a zigzag pattern for a welcoming entrance. Add to beds and borders to follow spring blooming plants and trees. The interesting tree bark is more visible up close from outdoor living areas—porch and patio. Smaller varieties can be grown in containers. It can also be trained as bonsai, the Japanese art of controlling a tree's size planted in a small pot or tray.

Combine Crape Myrtles with lavender, rosemary, santolina, salvia, phlomis, rockrose, artemisia, sedum, and thyme for Mediterranean-style gardens.

*For answers to all your home gardening questions, call Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m; or visit our website: <http://cetulare.ucdavis.edu>.*

June 11, 2016