

The Press Democrat
August 10, 2024

Crape myrtles need little water, look lovely in yards

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Crape myrtles come in a variety of colors including white, pink, lavender and red. Photo: Tribune News Service

Question: While driving along Main Street in Sebastopol last week, I was struck by the beauty of the stately trees with abundant white flowers that line the avenue. What are they? Are they suitable for a residential landscape?

Answer: You were admiring crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*), popular drought-tolerant street trees. In addition to those in Sebastopol, you can see crape myrtles all over Sonoma County, from Sixth Street in Petaluma to the entry of the Oakmont neighborhood and beyond. Crape myrtles begin blooming in mid-July and continue

through the end of September in a variety of colors including white, pink, lavender and red. In addition to the bright colors of the flowers, the bark on mature trees is quite striking with its mottled variations of tan, brown, cinnamon and gray. While the trees you saw in Sebastopol have singular trunks, other crape myrtles may have multi-branching trunks.

Crape myrtles are indigenous to temperate and tropical regions from Asia to Australia. Their leaf shape is similar to a true myrtle (*Myrtus*) and their brightly colored flowers are crinkly like crepe paper. Leaf colors can vary from green in summer to bronze, yellow, orange and red in autumn. Not only does *Lagerstroemia indica* do well in our hot summers and mild winters, but the colors of their long-lasting summer blooms and autumn foliage offer focal points from summer through early winter.

When crape myrtles are in bloom is the ideal time to select the exact blossom color you want. Bear in mind that plants are available either as multi- or single-trunked specimens. Multi-trunked trees are more shrub-like. As they mature they develop a height and width that requires more space near ground level. The single-trunk crape myrtle is a popular street tree that grows 15 to 25 feet tall and usually does not interfere with power lines. If you have limited space, consider a semi-dwarf variety that grows 4 to 10 feet tall. Crape myrtles can be susceptible to powdery mildew so select a resistant variety to minimize this problem.

They love full sun, well-draining soil

To maximize crape myrtle bloom, plant the trees in full sun and in well-draining soil to prevent waterlogged roots and stunted growth. Regular water is needed several times a week for the first 2 to 4 months after planting. A deep soaking to a depth of six inches once or twice a month is beneficial during the first 1 to 2 years and let the soil dry out between waterings. Crape myrtles tolerate dry soil better than soggy soil. Once established they require less water. Remember, if you have clay soil, typical of Sonoma County, that it retains water longer than the sandy, loamy soil more often found in the west county area.

Though not essential, pruning maximizes flowering, enhances shape and stimulates growth of new branches. Since crape myrtle blooms appear on new wood, finish pruning before April to allow for new branch growth. After careful pruning in the first few years, little pruning is needed except for the regular removal of dead or crossing branches, suckering shoots around the base of the tree and any extremely long branches.

To enhance water conservation, soil health, and weed control, apply a layer of mulch 3 to 5 inches deep around your tree, leaving 3 to 6 inches of bare earth around the trunk. Mulch can also highlight the colors, shapes and textures of the crape myrtle flowers, foliage and bark. You'll find the crape myrtle is not only attractive, but also easy to maintain, with minimal debris for a deciduous tree and few pests.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd, Patricia Decker and Karen Felker. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.