

Pruning Crape Myrtles

The objectives of pruning a crape myrtle are to maintain its natural sculptural form, produce strong branches that hold flowers upright, and open up its center to reveal the smooth, multi-toned bark that forms on mature trunks and branches.

Cutting it back to thick stubs (crape murder) each year makes these goals impossible. A graceful tree quickly becomes a fencepost or hat rack. Pretty bark never appears. Each beheaded trunk grows a Medusa-like tangle of spindly whips too weak to hold up flowers.

Crape myrtle flowers on new growth of the season, so you can prune plants any time during the late winter or early spring before growth begins, without loss of flower buds. Avoid pruning in early fall before the first frost, because pruning forces new growth and keeps the plant from going dormant. Severe freezes can kill the plant if it is not fully dormant.

The Right Way To Prune

For a beautiful plant, follow these guidelines.

- Prune in late winter. February is ideal.
- Remove suckers at the base, crossing or rubbing branches, and branches growing inward toward the center of the plant.
- As the tree grows, gradually remove all side branches from the main trunks up to a height of 5 feet or so.
- Cut back to a branch just above an outward-facing bud on the branch, or to the branch collar (a swollen area where the branch joins the trunk). Never leave lone or clustered stubs.
- Try to remove unwanted branches before they get thicker than a pencil.
- It's okay but unnecessary to cut off old seed heads.

Restoring a Butchered Plant

If you've beheaded a big crape myrtle to within a few feet of the ground, there's only one solution. Cut the sorry plant completely to the ground. It will grow back very quickly. The next winter, select three to five well-spaced trunks, and cut off any others at ground level. Follow the instructions from "The Right Way To Prune" above, and you'll have an attractive tree within five years.

But maybe you've only rounded off, or "hat-racked," your crape myrtle, cutting back all of its main branches to about the same height, in this case again, follow our "Right Way to Prune" process to get beautiful plants.

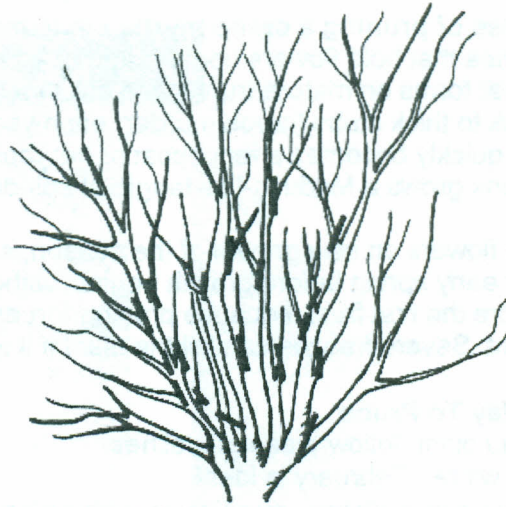
Once crape myrtles have bloomed and shed their flowers, they will set seed. The small round seedpods or capsules usually weigh the limbs down, making them sag. Using a sharp pair of clippers or hedge trimmers, cut off the seedpods. New shoots with buds will quickly appear, and you will get a second bloom.

Sometimes people are hesitant to remove seedpods because they think the round capsules are flower buds. This is not so. The seedpods are larger than the flower buds and extremely hard. If temperatures stay warm into the fall and you continue to remove spent flowers, you may even get a third or fourth bloom out of your crape myrtles.

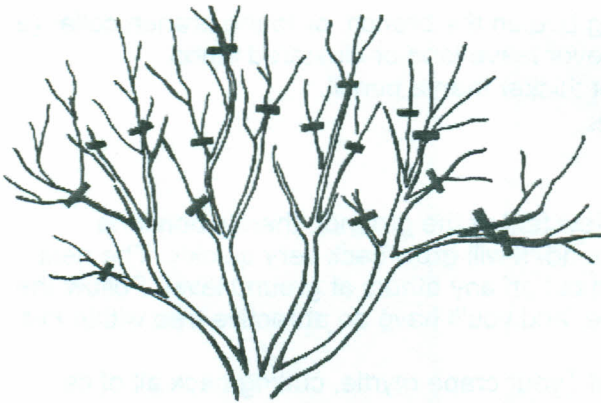


Pruning Cuts

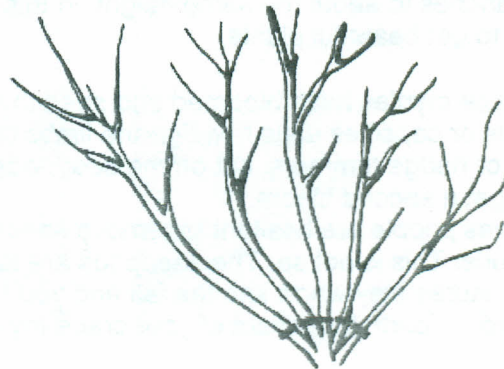
If you want a tree, cut out all except one to five branches at ground level. Remove all side branches up to the level where you want the limbs to start.



If you want intermediate size shrubs, cut out only small branches less than pencil size.



Prune back to within 6 inches of the ground each year if you want very low plants.



Some gardeners prefer growing crape myrtle as a compact shrub instead of a tree. To get these results, prune the stems back to approximately 6 inches above ground level each year. Severe pruning will not kill or injure a healthy plant. Prune before growth begins in the spring. The result will be an abundance of new flowering shoots.

If an intermediate size of shrub is desired, prune moderately by removing the twiggy growth smaller than pencil size. This annual pruning will stimulate more vigorous growth in the spring.