

Crapemyrtle: A Summer Show Off©  
Suggestions for Planting, Care and Maintenance.  
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Few plants put on a greater summer show and for a longer time than crapemyrtle, *Lagerstroemia indica*. Crapemyrtle like full sun where it is HOT! They grow slowly in the cool spring when other species are racing ahead. But when the heat of summer begins and sustained daytime temperatures are about 85 degrees F or above and other species are losing their luster, crapemyrtle begin to produce flower buds for the summer show-off period. Once flowering is triggered blooms typically continue until frost. Best of all, crapemyrtle produce huge numbers of flowers but few viable seeds so they do not become weeds in the landscape.

Crapemyrtle will survive in almost any soil. However, because they flower on new growth, the better the soil the more they grow and the more they flower. Watering during summer hot, dry spells is also beneficial to flowering.

The best time to plant crapemyrtle is during June, July, August, and early September while soils are at their maximum warmth. Once soils cool in the fall, even only moderately, rate of root growth slows dramatically. Planting after early October in Oklahoma is not recommended as plants may dehydrate and die during winter since few roots will have grown out into the surrounding soil.

#### Pests and Diseases.

Crapemyrtle typically have few or no problems in the landscape. New cultivars of crapemyrtle have been developed to resist attack by powdery mildew, the greatest problem with old cultivars. Plant any of the 'Whit' cultivars of crapemyrtle in full sun and mildew is not a problem. However, avoid planting in partial shade or where sprinkler irrigation wets plant foliage on a regular basis or where air movement is poor. Aphids occasionally occur in sufficient populations to slow growth. This is most likely to be a problem where lots of insecticides are used. Spiders play a key role in controlling insect pests, especially aphids. When insecticides kill spiders, aphid populations can increase abruptly. If soil moisture is adequate, but new growth appears to be slightly wilted, look on the underside of leaves for aphids. Aphid droppings on older leaves at first cause glossiness or shine, but later black, sooty mold appears on the leaf surfaces. The black is caused by a fungus growing on the aphid droppings.

Another pest of crapemyrtle, particularly in nurseries, is flea beetle. These small greenish or brown beetles are voracious feeders of crapemyrtle leaves and can appear in huge numbers in a short period of time. However, for reasons still unclear, flea beetles are not commonly problems in the landscape. In areas where Japanese beetles are present substantial foliage damage can occur and control necessary.

Cercospora leaf spot can cause premature drop of older leaves on crapemyrtle, particularly in late summer and fall or when the plant is in a location of stagnant air and high humidity. Plants in full sun and with good air circulation are most resistant. Red Rocket® is highly resistant, even under severe conditions.

#### Pruning.

The old practice of severely pruning crapemyrtle plants each fall or winter was thought to increase flowering. When this practice was put to the experimental test and compared with no pruning or light pruning, the greatest numbers of flowers were produced with no pruning. These findings match with studies with other species that have shown that pruning is always stunting. Pruning may be necessary where a plant over grows a site. But to indiscriminately severely prune each year is wrong. With new cultivars and a range of heights and growth habits, there are now crapemyrtle to fit most sunny locations.

If a low and dense shrub form is desired with red flowers, plant Tightwad Red® as it typically grows less than six inches per year and in a dense mound. In north central Oklahoma, Tightwad Red® plants seven years old are about 34 inches tall. Siren Red® has blood red flowers, is a more upright grower and eventually reaches a height of eight to 10 feet.

Other new cultivars provide an array of sizes, flower and foliage colors and other features. Tree form cultivars with true cherry red flowers are Dynamite® and Red Rocket®. Both will eventually reach a height of 15 to 20 feet. Raspberry Sundae® is a very upright grower that may reach 15 to 20 feet, has excellent fall color nearly every year and fragrant but sterile flowers. Burgundy Cotton® has dramatic wine-red new growth, then crimson flower buds and white flowers. Burgundy Cotton® may reach 12 to 15 feet tall. The newest addition is Rhapsody in Pink™ with near purple new foliage, soft pink flowers and sterile flowers, plus new flower buds form on the same structure when old flowers drop. Rhapsody in Pink™ may reach a height of 12 to 15 feet or more. Pink Velour® has wine new foliage and shrill pink flowers and may reach a height of 12 to 15 feet.

All 'Whit' series cultivars of crapemyrtle are semi-sterile and produce only a fraction of the number of seed capsules compared to fertile cultivars such as Natchez, Acoma and Muskogee. Three of the 'Whit' series; Raspberry Sundae®, Tightwad Red® and Rhapsody in Pink® are sterile with no viable seed and few or no seed capsules produced.

Sterility or even partial sterility is a major advantage to the plant. The purpose of the flower petals is to attract insects to facilitate pollination. Once pollination occurs and the embryo begins to expand, hormones are produced that cause the petals to drop. When flowers are sterile, the showy petals are retained longer. Production of seeds to reproduce the species is the primary objective of all plants. Developing seeds consume considerable energy, whereas sterile plants focus energy elsewhere.

#### Fertilizers.

Fertilizing crapemyrtle is similar to other species with one exception. A good spring dose of nitrogen is helpful. Remember, crapemyrtle flower on new growth so the more they grow, the more they flower. Also, especially with the new cultivars, if you want the plant to grow taller, fertilize heavily in the spring. All height growth occurs between bud swell in the spring and the initiation of flowering in June or July. Once flowering begins, little or no height growth occurs as any new shoot immediately develops flower buds. Unlike many other plants, flowering will continue until frost.

Do not fertilize crapemyrtle in late summer or fall. Most plant species respond to shorter days and cooler nights in the fall and begin to prepare for winter regardless of excess fertility, but crapemyrtle are different. When fertilizer and moisture are plentiful, crapemyrtle may continue vigorous growth too late in the fall and can suffer winter damage as a result.

#### Surviving Winter.

Crapemyrtle tops are cold hardy to about -5 to -8 degrees F when normal fall cool down and onset of cold occurs. When freezing temperatures arrive abnormally early, tops can be damaged or killed at higher temperatures. Loss of part or the entire top is undesirable if a tree form or large plant is desired; however, in most other situations the damage is minor. For example, in north central Oklahoma in February 1996 the temperature dropped to -15 degrees F. Tops of all crapemyrtle were killed to the ground, regardless of age, species, hybrid, or cultivar. By early July the following growing season, however, Dynamite®, Red Rocket®, Pink Velour®, and Raspberry Sundae® were about four feet tall and flowering profusely. The plant tops had been killed but the root system was not damaged, so new growth was especially vigorous.

In upper portions of USDA hardiness zones 7, zone 6 and even milder parts of zone 5, crapemyrtle can also serve as useful landscape plants. During mild winters the tops survive and increase in size, but during severe winters crapemyrtle function as hardy perennials. As long as crapemyrtle are planted in full sun (hot) locations, and managed correctly, they can be major contributors to summer color well beyond the deep south. Remember, crapemyrtle like it hot and in more northern locations, selecting a warm, sunny site is especially important. An effective practice for northern locations includes the following steps:

1. Cut off tops about four to six inches after several hard freezes.
2. Cover stumps and surrounding soil area three to five feet in diameter with heavy, black weed barrier fabric. Cover the fabric with coarse mulch.
3. In spring, about the time of the anticipated last frost, remove the mulch and fabric.
4. Do not mulch the soil around the crapemyrtle since an exposed soil warms more quickly. Enjoy the foliage and flowers, then repeat the process in the fall.

Crapemyrtle is the ultimate summer show-off, but with the spectacular new grow on selections like Pink Velour®, Burgundy Cotton® and Rhapsody in Pink® color in the landscape begins with the first new leaves of spring. With only modest care, crapemyrtle provide color in the landscape longer than most other trees or shrubs and with little maintenance. For more information about 'Whit' cultivars and color photos, visit [www.lacebarkinc.com](http://www.lacebarkinc.com). Enjoy!