

# Pruning Crape Myrtle

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Whenever I get to the Q & A portion of a talk about pruning trees, there is always a question about how to prune crape myrtles. In the spring, those questions are even more common as it is that time of year when folks start thinking about pruning the crape myrtle trees in their landscape. The discussion always seems to center around how far back you should prune them. Unfortunately, for many folks pruning crape myrtle is often synonymous with topping the tree..

Most arborists are not sure where the practice of topping crape myrtles started. The practice has been around a long time. The technique of severely pruning crape myrtles has even gotten a name. The term “Crape Murder” has often been attributed to originating from master gardeners upset with the practice but according to Southern Living Magazine, the term was first used in a 1997 article written about the hard pruning practice.

Many arborists wonder where did the practice of severely pruning (topping) start? Perhaps it was done after someone observed trees in Europe being pruned with the pollarding method. Perhaps it was someone that needed to reduce the height of the tree because it got too tall. What benefits could there be for the tree. While the benefits of crape myrtle topping cannot be found, the harm it does to trees well known.

- The heavy pruning disfigures the profile to where the tree no longer looks like a tree.
- It creates large scars that are visible for several years.
- The blooms after topping are produced on thin vigorous growth that cannot support the weight of the bloom causing it to droop down.
- It creates more maintenance on an otherwise low maintenance tree.

# Pruning Crape Myrtle (pg. 2)

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In the past, it was true that you pruned crape myrtles to reduce powdery mildew infestations. With today's resistant cultivars, crape myrtles require very little pruning.

The reason most often used for topping crape myrtles is that they have gotten too tall. All you need to do is purchase the variety of crape myrtle that meets your height requirement. To look at the various varieties and sizes go to:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/MG/MG26600.pdf>

Another reason given for topping crape myrtle has been that the topped trees bloom more. To receive the benefit of larger flowers from pruning, prune just pencil sized branches without jeopardizing overall tree health caused by topping the tree

If you find yourself in the position to prune crape myrtles, here are a few simple steps to follow.

- First, prune sucker sprouts and basal sprouts. If left to grow, these sprouts may form woody stems that eventually compete with existing main stems.
- Second, prune any rubbing or crossing branches, as well as dead branches. This may include branches that are crossing through the canopy from one side to another. As always, make the pruning cuts at the branch collar.
- Third, (this one is optional) tip prune the branches to remove spent flower buds. This is also called pencil pruning because the branches removed are no thicker than a pencil. The best way to avoid over-pruning crape myrtles is to choose the correct cultivar that matches the location where you wish to put it. For more information on pruning refer to: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/EP/EP39900.pdf>

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