



in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas

Crape Murder Vs. Pencil Pruning

Whacking off the top branches of a crape myrtle is a crime against nature. Performing "crape murder" is like shaving your head once a year to re-grow the hair; stripping all of the paint off of the house each year then applying new paint; or ripping up the lawn because the blades of grass are a bit high.

"Off with their heads," screamed the Queen, in Alice in Wonderland. We think of that line every time we spot another crape myrtle with its head chopped off. Often, its former crown is lying in bundles at the curb, ready for its journey to the landfill. What a needless waste of money and resources. In reality, crape myrtles require very little trimming unless they are planted where their normal height is a problem. They are now available in a wide range of mature heights and widths, so there is one for every space.



Murdered crape myrtle.

The University of Florida continuously conducts horticultural research in numerous test plots around the state. In one they planted three crape myrtles of the same species. They were all properly, structurally pruned to eliminate crossing and parallel branches and suckers. Then in late winter, which is the proper time to trim them, each one was treated differently. One was whacked (murdered), the second was left untouched, and the third was only "pencil pruned." Then the researchers waited a few months for new growth to emerge. The whacked one required more subsequent pruning to remove the multitude of sprouts that emerged from each severe cut. The one untouched was a bit dense. The pencil pruned crape myrtle developed the best shape. Note that shoots from large cuts are typically weak and susceptible to breakage.

But, what about the flowers which are the signature attribute of this tree? The fewest blooms were on the murdered trees which busts the myth



Pencil pruning done properly.

that a hard pruning is needed to get more blossoms. Pencil pruning is easy to do, requires less labor, and generates far less yard waste than topping the trees. Just remember to trim no branches in the crown that are thicker than the width of a pencil.

To extend the blooming season of crape myrtles, trim off the clusters of green balls which develop into seeds that appear after the blooms fade. Since crape myrtles bloom on the newest growth, the trimming will generate new blooms. If so motivated, this can be done up to two times

So, remember to lighten your work load this late winter or cut out this article and share it with your landscape maintenance contractor. To keep our crape myrtle in tip-top shape, we prune for structural issues, remove suckers and only pencil prune near the tips. We also remove by hand, Spanish moss and ball moss which can shade out the foliage. With its full crown of white flowering branches, it is indeed glorious.



Improper pruning generates an abundance of yard waste.



Properly pruned crape myrtles at Epcot.

Photos by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis.