

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

Darrell Blackwelder

March 7, 2007

A friend of mine at church asked me last week the #1 gardening question of 2006. I didn't have ponder very long, the answer was easy-pruning crepe myrtles. During the spring it seems everyone asks about pruning crape myrtles. Lopping off the tops of crape myrtles has become a common practice in Rowan County. This "chain sawing" practice is often referred to as "Crape Murder".

When I question homeowner about topping these trees, the motives are varied: to promote flowering; the tree is too large for the space provided. The most likely reason is they see their neighbors or landscape contractors pruning it and feel the need to follow suit.

Contrary to popular belief, crape myrtles do not require heavy pruning to promote bloom. Crape myrtles growing in Hurley Park in Salisbury receive little or no pruning and bloom profusely each summer. Those seeking perfectly pruned crape myrtles need go no further than Salisbury to observe correct pruning practices. The City of Salisbury horticulturalist, Mark Martin, and his staff, has crape myrtles and other trees on city properties and rights of way pruned to perfection.

Flowers are borne on new growth. Both trees type and newer dwarf type plants produce flowers without any pruning. However, light pruning will produce larger flowers and will make the trees bloom more profusely. Judicious pruning in late winter or early spring stimulates vigorous new growth in the spring. These plants can also be encouraged to bloom a second time in summer by pruning flowers immediately after they fade.

Some want to improve the appearance of the trees by removing the seed heads before new spring growth begins. This is recommended only if they are within reach. Once the plant becomes a tall, mature plant, let nature to take its course and

retain the natural grace of the plant.

Judicious pruning should be practiced as crape myrtles grow and mature. Prune out weak, dead or damaged branches on a routine basis. Crossing branches or those that rub should also be removed.

Crape myrtles are usually grown as multi-trunked trees requiring corrective pruning at an early age. Trees are usually pruned to retain three major tree trunks. Remove suckers as they appear in the summer to keep the trunks neat and balanced. Without training, mature trees will grow like an overgrown bush.

Crape myrtles grow best in well drained soils with direct sunlight. An ideal location would be to place tree types in an area that allows the tree to develop their natural style without whacking off their tops.

Plant breeders have concentrated not only on color and bark texture, but size. Crape myrtles now grow to mature heights anywhere from 3 to 35 feet, so pruning to shorten the height is no longer a valid issue. If you need smaller trees visit and support local nurseries, plant smaller dwarf type crape myrtles and let them grow naturally.

Cooperative Extension will sponsor a Crape Myrtle Pruning Demonstration, Saturday, March 17, 10:00 a.m. at the Agricultural Center on Old Concord Road in Salisbury. Basic pruning techniques on smaller crape myrtles will be demonstrated as well as a brief tour of Salisbury to observe older pruned specimens. Contact Darrell Blackwelder at 704-216-8970 or darrell_blackwelder@ncsu.edu for more information.

Darrell Blackwelder is an agricultural agent in charge of horticulture with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Rowan County. For archived garden columns or other information, visit the Rowan County Master Gardener web site at

www.rowanmastergardener.com , e-mail

Darrell_Blackwelder@ncsu.edu