For Information call: 321-633-1702
sasc@ufl.edu

Fact Sheet # FS 6019 HORT
Date: February 2006

Crape Myrtle

Sally Scalera

If you want an attractive flowering tree, one of the best choices is a Crape myrtle. I would not recommend this plant to anyone though, who is not willing to prune it back each year. These trees come in a large variety of colors and can bloom throughout the summer if they are given a little help. Like most plants that bloom during the summer, crape myrtles form flower clusters as the new growth develops during the spring months. This means they can be pruned during the winter without fear of cutting off any future blooms. To produce the most blooms in the summer, crape myrtles should be pruned every winter. Unless the plant has grown out of control, light trimming is all that is needed to eliminate the weaker stems and encourage a lot of flower-producing new shoots. Pruning back to limbs that are much thicker than thumb-size may delay flowering for months - possibly even until the following year. Severe pruning such as this encourages lots of stem and shoot growth, which has to mature before flowering limbs form. In comparison, a light trimming done every year may result in flowering shoots as early as the end of May. Start the winter pruning, anytime after the leaves have fallen off, by removing the seed pods that have formed at the tips of the branches. Clip them back to where the limb is the thickness of a finger. This will ensure sturdy new growth that can support the heavy flower clusters. A properly trimmed crape myrtle should have one to five sturdy trunks, plus and oval-to-rounded shape and an open branching habit. Do not “top” crape myrtles by cutting all of the trunks off at the same height. Not only does this create an ugly (sorry, I guess my opinion got loose) or an unnatural look but it also opens up the trunks to infection and decay and the new growth will be poorly attached. Here are some tips to help you complete the pruning.

* Thin out twiggy shoots along the main trunks and side branches.
* Remove crisscrossing limbs and dead or diseased branches.
* Eliminate suckers from the lower trunk.

After the pruning is done, there are a few more things that can be done to help out the summer bloom. Now is a good time to renew the mulch layer that controls the weeds and helps conserve soil moisture during dry spells. Although crape myrtles are drought-tolerant, they flower best when they receive a good soaking at least once a week. Crape myrtles come in a wide selection of sizes and colors. They can range from small to very tall with dwarf crape myrtles growing less than four feet, semi-dwarf staying under 12 feet, intermediate growing no more than 20 feet and trees growing taller than 20 feet. Crape myrtle blooms can be in shades of pink, red, lilac and of course white. After pruning them in the winter, all that is left to do is sit back and wait for the flowers to appear. To encourage a crape myrtle to bloom repeatedly throughout the summer, simply prune off the blooms once they fade and that will encourage the tree to bloom again. If you continually prune off the faded blooms throughout the summer your crape myrtle could bloom two to three (and maybe four) times throughout the summer!

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating.