

Avoid 'crape murder' with limited pruning

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Crape myrtles that are pruned each year at the same spot develop unsightly, knobby branch ends. This practice is known as “crape murder.” Credit: MSU Ag Communications/Kat Lawrence

Efforts to prevent people from committing "crape murder" are reducing the number of unsightly, knobby-knuckled branch ends but may leave people wondering how to correctly shape crape myrtles.

Gary Bachman, a horticulturist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service and Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, said many crape myrtles are pruned back to the same spot every year. This causes the cut ends to swell into a fist-like shape. Bachman works from the MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi.

"Homeowners see professional landscape maintenance people do that and think they're supposed to cut their crape myrtles back like that," Bachman said. "It's really the result of folks wanting a certain size plant, so they're pruning it back to the same spot because they know at the end of summer, the plant will be only so big."

Bachman, who hosts Southern Gardening on television and radio and writes a newspaper column by the same name, said the problem comes down to the fact that the wrong crape myrtle variety is growing in that spot.

"Find a species with different growing characteristics and use it there," Bachman said. "For example, people love a white crape myrtle. Natchez is a very popular variety people choose, but it's a 30-foot tree if you let it go. When people try to use it in their landscapes, it's often too large for

the space that they have.

"A more appropriate tree would be an Acoma crape, which is also white, but it only gets to about 10 feet high at the most," he said.

Crape myrtles are resilient trees and grow back from just about any pruning given to them in the spring. By summer, they are full of new growth and blooms, but in the winter when the leaves have fallen, the damaged ends are visible.

Those who have crape myrtles with damaged ends can overcome them in time. Bachman said to let the tree grow unpruned one year, then prune it back the next year at a point past the trouble spot. Crape myrtles will bloom in the summer even if they have not been pruned.

Jeff Wilson, Extension regional horticulture specialist working from the North Mississippi Research and Extension Center in Verona, said planting a variety that is the right size for the location prevents most pruning.

"Research has shown that if you cut crape myrtles, you do get more blooms," Wilson said. "My experience is that it works best to train the plant with careful, light pruning the first two or three years, and then let it grow. The prettiest crape myrtles are the ones left to grow into their natural shape."

Wilson called correct pruning an art and said any pruning that is done should take into consideration the tree itself and where it is growing. He had encouragement for those who have done it wrong in the past or who have come into possession of crape myrtles that have the unsightly, knotted ends.

"No matter how bad you butcher the [crape myrtle](#), it's going to come

back this summer," he said.

More information: Find more information about pruning crape myrtles in MSU Extension Service publication P2007, "Crapemyrtle: Flower of the South." msucares.com/pubs/publications/p2007.pdf

Provided by Mississippi State University

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