

## Crapemyrtle: Culture and Care.

Carl Whitcomb, Lacebark Inc. Stillwater, OK

Crapemyrtle, *Lagerstroemia indica*, are tough, adaptable and easy to grow over hardiness zones 6 through 10 and even in hot locations in zone 5, --- provided; (1) they are planted in full sun, (2) planting is during June, July or August while soils are warmest, (3) in any reasonable soil, (4) provided at least modest fertility, primarily nitrogen in spring, and (5) are watered regularly the first summer. When properly located in the landscape, crapemyrtle is one of the toughest and most showy summer flowering shrubs.

Crapemyrtle is one of a limited number of shrubs and small trees that flower on new growth. Most other plants develop flower buds in the fall, and then bloom once in spring. Crapemyrtle also have the capacity to bloom several times during the growing season. With old cultivars, removal of seed capsules hastened more new growth and flowers. However, the good news is that new cultivars Rhapsody in Pink® and Double Feature® are both sterile and rebloom continuously on the same panicle. This provides season long flowers – uninterrupted – with no seeds. This feature will be incorporated into other colors and sizes of crapemyrtle and other species in the future.

Crapemyrtle increasingly is getting additional attention, yet, misinformation about the plant persists. This is an attempt to clarify information about crapemyrtle, having grown over ½ million seedlings over the past 27 years. In a recent national gardening magazine it was noted that crapemyrtle must have well drained soils and can be planted in either sun or part shade. The reality is that they do best in full sun and will tolerate almost any soil even where drainage is marginal. At Lacebark Inc, in northern Oklahoma, on the hardiness zone border between 7 and 6, we plant crapemyrtle seedlings in full sun and in whatever soil is available. For example, in a row 300 feet long of current seedlings, at one end the soil is heavy and would be unsuitable to many plants, then extends down into a swale where soils are quite heavy and remain wet for a week or more following rain, then up the opposite side with soils becoming increasingly higher in elevation and sandy. Crapemyrtle plants the entire length of the row thrive and are in full bloom as I write this on an August day with temperature 110 F. They are drip irrigated as needed. Amend the soil before planting if you wish, but crapemyrtle grow very well without it.

**Light.** Crapemyrtle grow and flower best in full sun. Any decrease in light intensity and duration decreases growth and especially flowering and reduces flower color intensity. Crapemyrtle will survive almost anywhere, even moderate to heavy shade, but growth will be slow, flowers few or none and mildew likely.

**Temperature.** Crapemyrtle like it HOT! A location with reflected light and heat is a great spot for Crapemyrtle --- as long as water is provided it will reward with lots of flowers year after year. And this applies especially in hardiness zones 6 or 5. In more northern areas it is important NOT to mulch as exposed soils warms up faster versus soil under mulch.



Early questions also dealt with how far south could Dynamite® and Red Rocket® be grown. And, because it is a deciduous shrub or small tree, it seemed likely that a cold / chilling period would be required. This turned out not to be true. In response to inquiries about growing Dynamite® in Naples or Miami, FL or Tucson or Phoenix, AZ. my reply was that I did not know, but to try a few. We now know that the “Whit” series of crapemyrtle, when grown in a climate with no winter or even a frost, typically stop growing in late Nov or early Dec. and drop leaves, then in mid-Jan or early Feb, new growth begins for another season of flowering.

**Fertilizers;** Crapemyrtle have the same nutrient requirements as other plants. However, due to their very fibrous root system they are especially efficient in gathering and utilizing whatever nutrients a soil provides. Crapemyrtle also have a wide tolerance for nutrient levels. For example, plant an azalea or blueberry and many other plants in a soil low in iron and manganese and high pH and they will turn yellow and die. Plant a crapemyrtle in the same soil and provide a moderate level of nitrogen and water and it will thrive. This section is included to show the toughness and wide adaptability of the plant. However, remember that flowering is on new growth, therefore the better the growth the more flowers.

At Lacebark research farm, we fertilize with a high nitrogen fertilizer once in spring and apply no more nitrogen throughout the growing season. We currently use a dry, chemical farm fertilizer analysis 28-4-6 at a rate of about 100# nitrogen per acre. And this applies to rows of established plants or open rows waiting to be planted. The Achilles heel of crapemyrtle is that once flowering begins, if fertilized and watered heavily, they will continue to grow late in the season and fail to harden in preparation for winter.

**Weed Competition.** Bermudagrass is a severe competitor with all woody plants. A young crapemyrtle planted in an area physically cleared of bermudagrass (temporarily) and properly fertilized and watered will soon be engulfed by bermudagrass and stunted.

Glyphosate/Roundup herbicide will kill bermudagrass, both above ground stolons/runners and underground rhizomes. But, crape-myrtle are sensitive to glyphosate, especially young green stems and leaves. It is nearly impossible to kill an established crape-myrtle with glyphosate. However the plant will be stunted with clusters of miniaturized leaves for the next growing season and no flowers. For example, spray glyphosate around a crape-myrtle during summer and you will typically see only slight to moderate leaf discoloration. However, with the emergence of new growth the following year the dwarfing and miniaturization of leaves comes into full view. In most cases, if no more glyphosate is applied, the following growing season the plant will partially or fully return to normal.

Glyphosate will also turn cherry red flowers of Dynamite® or Red Rocket® pink or white, and with a dosage so miniscule that no other plant damage or discoloration can visually be detected. If bermudagrass or other grasses are a problem around crape-myrtle, use Grass-Be-Gone or similar compounds with the active ingredient Sethoxydim, or Clethodim, as these control grasses only and do not harm woody plants. The key is to apply while the grass is small and most vulnerable.

Pests. Aphids occasionally attack crape-myrtle, especially when insecticide sprays are routinely applied. The #1 predator that keeps aphids in check in nature is spiders. Any pesticide that kills or causes spiders to leave an area is likely to increase aphid problems. Japanese beetle may cause slight to severe defoliation of crape-myrtle. And, in extremely hot and dry areas, spider mites may occasionally be a problem.

Powdery mildew and Cercospora leaf spot disease can cause problems on old susceptible cultivars. However, with the new “Whit” series of cultivars, both of these diseases are rarely seen in landscapes, except where plants are in partial shade and are regularly contacted by sprinkler irrigation.