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How to Grow a Crepe Myrtle Tree

**Photo Credit:** Noel V. Baebler

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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Crepe Myrtles

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: August 11, 2024



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small trees for a second bloom? In our growing guide, learn more about how to care for the “lilac of the South” to maintain its long blooming period of showy flowers.

About Crepe Myrtles

Crepe myrtles are a group of about fifty species of flowering shrubs and small trees which thrive in USDA Hardiness Zones 6 to 9.

They're within the genus *Lagerstroemia*, native to China; those planted in the US are typically *Lagerstroemia indica* or hybrids thereof, and are deciduous.

When botanist to the French King Louis XVI André Michaux introduced this tree into Charleston around 1786, the crepe myrtle quickly became Southern favorite as it's heat- and drought-resistant (as well as deer-resistant!).

As well as their long-lasting blooms in summer, crepe myrtles offer year-round interest with beautiful foliage in autumn and gorgeous, exfoliating bark in winter. As the tree matures, the bark at the base will begin to peel, leaving behind a unique, smooth trunk.

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The showy flowers cover the shrubs in clouds of color from July through September, adding color when many other flowering trees have finished. Colors range from true reds to vibrant pinks, shades of purple and whites. Blooms are formed in panicles 6 to over 15 inches long.



Crepe Myrtles are known for their colorful and long-lasting flowers in summer.
Credit: Noel Baebler

Coming in many sizes, crepe myrtles can

reach 25 to 30 feet and 10 to 15 feet wide. It is VERY important that you understand the mature height of your crepe myrtle variety. This is the biggest problem and we all want to avoid what one Southern garden writer calls “crepe myrtle” murder. If you have a smaller space, choose a dwarf or semi-dwarf varieties.

Crepe myrtles also make excellent container plantings, so those of us in colder climates can still enjoy this flowering shrub—as long as you pull your container crepe myrtle indoors for the winter.

Read Next

- [Growing Oleander: The Complete Guide](#)
- [Coral Bell Plants: The Complete Guide to Growing](#)
- [How to Grow Rose of Sharon](#)

PLANTING

Crepe myrtles love full sunshine with a minimum of 6 hours a day. They will grow in partial sun or shade but will likely not flower as much. Planting these trees in a shady location is the most frequent cause of failures to bloom.

They are not picky about their soil as long as it drains well; they do **not** like a wet, soggy site. In contrast, crepe myrtles are drought-tolerant once established, which is one of the reasons they are low maintenance. Crepe myrtles prefer neutral to slightly acidic soil. If soil gets to alkaline (above 6.5), this may cause yellow leaves; add garden sulfur to lower the pH; coffee grounds can help, too.



Think about proximity to sidewalks, power-lines, and other obstructions. Picking a tree-sized crepe myrtle to plant under your first-floor window might result in a lot of annual pruning in the following years. A crepe myrtle that grows to 25 feet tall and wide might get you in trouble with your electric company if you plant it under the power lines.

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Do future you a favor and plant the right shrub in the right location.

When to Plant Crepe Myrtles

In USDA zones 7 to 10, crepe myrtles are best planted in the fall or early spring. However, if you grabbed a crepe myrtle from the nursery or garden center in the summer because it caught your eye in full bloom, don't worry. They can be planted in summer as well.

Regardless of planting time, keep an eye on it and water it regularly as it becomes established. It will be especially important to give a newly-planted crepe myrtle lots of water in the summer months to promote good root growth. Don't stick it in that sunny spot in the backyard in August and then go on vacation for three weeks.

How to Plant Myrtles

Plant crepe myrtles as you would other shrubs or ornamental trees. Check this page from Penn State Extension for more information on [how to plant ornamental shrubs and trees.](#)

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- Start by giving the tree or shrub a thorough watering while it is still in the original container. Not only will it slip out of its pot more easily, but you'll also minimize stress on the tree.
- Remove the sod (if any) and place it aside to compost later.
- Dig a hole as deep as the root ball but about three times as wide. Ideally, the hole should look like a shallow bowl, not a well.
- Clip any circling roots, sometimes called girdling roots. If your new crepe myrtle is

rootball to stimulate new growth. Rough it up a little.

- Place the plant in the hole. It should be sitting so the old soil level (from when it was potted) will be at the same height when the hole is filled in.
- Backfill the hole with the soil you removed, and tamp it in firmly. You don't want air pockets down by the roots. Pause when the hole is partially refilled and water, then continue backfilling.
- Make a ring or wall of soil an inch or two high in a circle around the shrub or tree to help water infiltrate instead of running off, then water again.
- Apply mulch 1 to 2 inches deep. Use an acid mulch such as pine bark or oak leaves for crepe myrtles.

Mulch tip: Don't pile the mulch up around the trunk like a cone. Mulch should not contact the stem of the tree or shrub. Make a donut, not a pyramid.



GROWING

Crepe myrtles are fairly low-maintenance additions to your garden or yard. Follow these simple tips.

- During the first two years, crepe myrtles should be watered regularly and deeply once a week, or twice a week in extremely hot weather. Once established, take care not to over-water these drought-tolerant trees; water about once every other week.
- During its first growing season, give the trees a slow-release liquid fertilizer every month from spring to summer; always water in well. After its first growing season, crepe myrtles should only need fertilizer once a year in early spring; do not fertilize in summer.
- Remove suckers that grow at the base. They rob energy from the plant and look messy.
- Snipping off spent flower clusters produces more blooms.
- You'll notice seedpods after bloom; it's not necessary to remove seed pods but you may remove the seed pods with a sharp pair of clippers to remove the weight off

- Apply 1 to 2 inches of pine needle mulch to protect the roots during winter in colder climates.
- Crepe myrtles will transplant easily if they are outgrowing their space; transplant when dormant in late fall or winter.

How to Prune a Crepe Myrtle

Crepe Myrtles do not need to be pruned, however, people often end up pruning because they bought a tree that's too big for their space. Unfortunately, many people prune incorrectly and butcher their tree.

Never cut this tree back to thick stubs. Always keep the natural shape of the tree. Here's how to prune:

1. In late winter, when the tree is dormant and before leaf-out, prune this multi-trunked tree to 3 to 5 trunks (no more than 7) and remove low-hanging branches below the 4- to 5-foot height of your tree. Prune large branches back to a crotch.
2. Early each spring, remove dead and weak branches or interior branches that cross, rub, or grow inward.

prune crepe myrtles.

Types

- ‘Dynamite’ is a deep red bloomer with orange fall leaves. It typically grows 10 to 15 feet tall.
- ‘Zuni’ is a dark lavender stunner with orange or burgundy autumn foliage. Hardy to zone 6 and typically a manageable 9 to 12 feet tall.
- ‘Black Diamond’ is a designer line of crepe myrtles with dark, almost black foliage and bright blooms, bred to continue flowering all summer.
- ‘Natchez’ is a rapid grower that can put on 3 to 5 feet annually. Mature size may reach 30 feet.
- ‘Chickasaw’ is a dwarf shrub that blooms in pink or lavender and will stay about 2 feet tall, spreading to 3 to 4 feet wide, making it great for containers.
- If you live in cooler zones, plant cold-hardy varieties (‘Acoma,’ ‘Centennial Spirit,’ or ‘Hopi’).

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PESTS/DISEASES

Note that crepe myrtles may not bloom fully until their second season. Other reasons for lack of bloom include: not enough sun, over-pruning, too much fertilizer or watering.

The main disease problems with crape myrtles are fungal leaf spot and powdery mildew. Look for resistant varieties, especially if you live in a wet, humid location. Many of the issues below can be handled with soapy water sprays, horticultural oil, or neem oil.

- [Powdery mildew](#)
- [Japanese beetles](#)
- [Aphids](#)

- Sooty mold (caused by the sticky secretions of the aphids)

WIT AND WISDOM

- The word 'crepe' in the name refers to the crinkly texture of the flowers that resemble crepe paper.
- You may have seen the name spelled crape myrtle, crepe myrtle, crepemyrtle, or crapemyrtle. All are acceptable.
- There is no need to buzz off the tops every year like a flat-top haircut. Plant the appropriately-sized crepe myrtle and enjoy its beautiful, natural form.

SHRUBS AND TREES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture. [Read More from Andy Wilcox](#)

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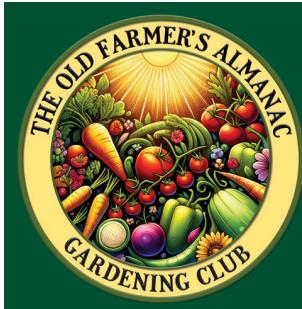
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Lorie Frias (not verified) 2 years ago

I love crepe myrtles, but DO NOT plant them near a pool or where the wind will blow the dropping petals into the pool.

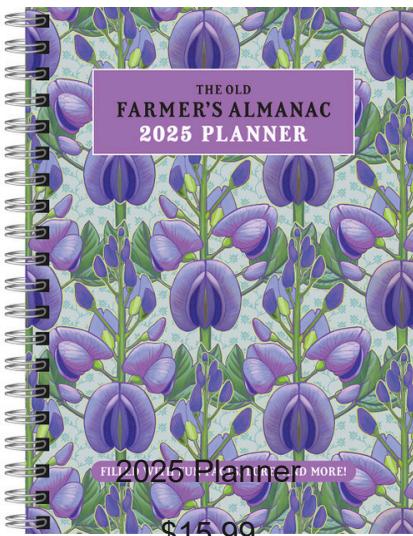
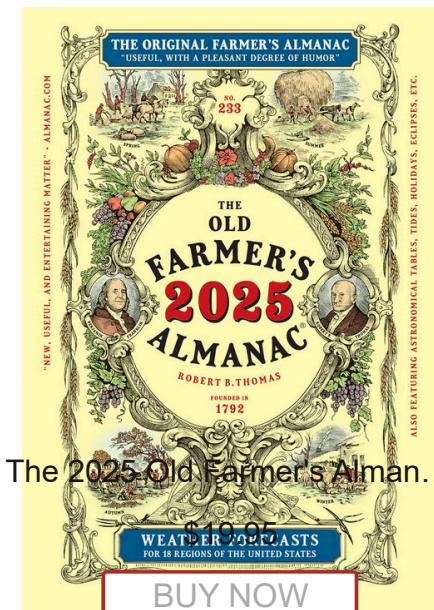
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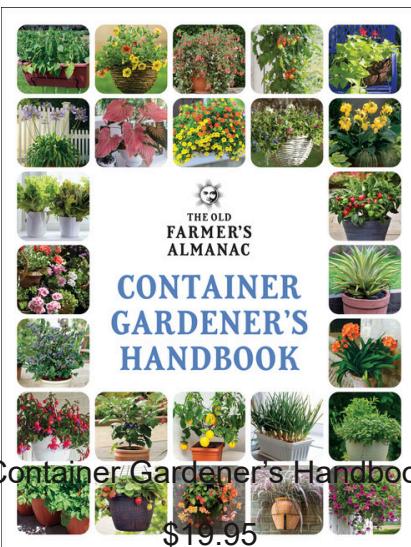
Nina (not verified) 1 year 11 months ago

Definitely don't plant by pool! We have about 3 large ones and they're a mess.

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