Choosing a Crape Myrtle

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Sioux crape myrtle is a tall, narrow, upright grower. Other cultivars have different growth habits. Select one appropriate for the intended spot in the landscape.

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The crape myrtle (Lagerstroemia species) is a beautiful and versatile shrub or small tree which originated in China, Japan and other areas of Southeast Asia and is now found throughout the Southeastern United States. It is a beautiful plant, long-blooming, drought-tolerant once established and is prized for its flowers as well as for its sculptural beauty. Most often, it is grown in this area as a small, multi-trunked flowering shade tree. It is easily propagated by cuttings. When planted in the correct spot it will provide years of carefree beauty and winter interest.

Location, location, location—an important consideration in gardening as well as in real estate. This is especially true when choosing crape myrtles for your landscape, since they are available in such a wide range of sizes, from less than three feet to thirty feet or more. The average homeowner is concerned primarily with flower color and aesthetics. However, it is critical to also consider the ultimate size of the plant at maturity. Make sure you plant in a well-drained, sunny spot. It is important to note that a crape myrtle that is planted in an appropriate spot will be more disease and pest tolerant.

A large cultivar like Natchez, when planted too close to a home, will require constant pruning in order to keep it from outgrowing its allotted space. You’ve probably noticed examples of “crape murder” around Tallahassee in the late winter, yearly over-pruning to control size. This is a classic example of the wrong plant in the wrong place and a cause of many wasted landscape dollars. If aesthetics are important to you, an “amputated” plant is anything but attractive. Severe pruning also encourages basal sprouting. Ideally, crape myrtles require little pruning during their lifetimes. Generally, it is necessary to prune crossing branches during early years to establish a good framework for the plant.
Also remove the suckers that sprout at the base. But once the plant becomes large, pruning is difficult and really not needed if the plant is in the right spot. If the plant is small enough, spent flowers may be removed to encourage a second blooming.

It is certainly possible to find a crape myrtle that will provide you with both the desired size and flower color, but you will need to do a little research. Decide on the maximum mature size and the color that you would prefer, then visit the web page below, and you’ll find scores of crape myrtles in every color and size as well as proper techniques for propagation, fertilizing and pruning. Many nurseries will also label plants with cultivar information.

-Go to http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/gardening_landscaping.htm
-Click on IFAS
-Search by keywords “crape myrtle”