

# Not your grandmother's crape myrtles

New selections give gardeners more options

**G**raceful, tree-form crape myrtles with gently bending branches often anchor a home landscape. But why relegate this colorful and versatile plant to a single purpose?

“People used to think they were limited to tree-form crape myrtles in their landscapes, but with the breeders developing what I call ‘perennial-sized’ specimens, homeowners can now enjoy a full range of sizes and growth habits,” says Allan Armitage, horticulturalist and former director of the University of Georgia Trial Gardens in Athens.

“About a decade ago, I began seeing smaller versions of crape myrtles, including the Razzle Dazzle series and other compact varieties. Now that these are on the market, consumers are finding new ways to enjoy them.”

Armitage says that the trend toward smaller cultivars offers a solution to a major challenge: “crape murder.”

Crape murder happens when people severely prune back their crape myrtles—usually by 40 percent or more. The tree’s trunks are often cut off just a few feet from the ground, resulting in the mutilation of their beautiful branch architecture and the formation of ugly, knuckle-like growth. New growth emerges at the cut, forming tight clumps of branches. The next year’s pruning of these branches forms further short clumps, and the process continues.

“If they had chosen the right-sized variety initially, they wouldn’t have to prune them so harshly,” he says. “If you’re going to prune a tree-form, avoid taking off any branches wider than your finger. This type of pruning will minimize the knobby growth. Nonetheless, crape myrtles are very tough plants that can survive hard pruning, so if you must prune, go right ahead.”

## Pick the right size

Crape myrtles are available in four sizes: dwarf, which grow 3 to 5 feet tall; intermediate, 5 to 10 feet;



Summerlasting ‘Coconut’

DORENE WYUJA/MONROVIA



Mixed colors of the perennial-size GreatMyrtle crapes are perfect near a mailbox.

medium, 10 to 20 feet; and tall, higher than 20 feet. Consider where the plant will be installed and select the proper size.

“Crape myrtles are fast-growing plants, so even if you purchase a dwarf size, you may find yourself needing to prune,” Armitage says. “With the newer perennial-sized plants, you can happily prune away without negative consequences.”

A new group of perennial-size crapes called the GreatMyrtle series is available in four colors: white, light pink, medium pink and deep pinkish red. These compact plants work well in several applications.

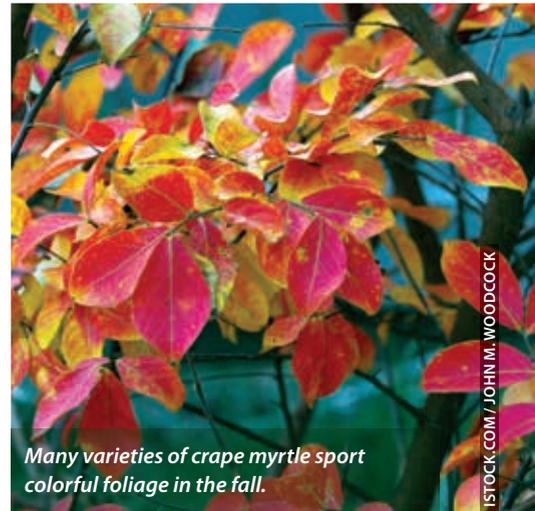
“Because of their low height and spread—2 to 3 feet—GreatMyrtles can be used just like perennials in home landscapes,” says Melanie Byrne with GardenChoice, an alliance of horticultural companies that test and introduce new ornamentals to gardeners. “They add interest and can be used as year-round foundation plants.”

Monrovia, a California-based wholesale and retail nursery, offers new varieties of dwarf crape myrtles in its Summerlasting series.

“Summerlasting crape myrtles were selected for their beautiful, long-lasting flowers,” says Georgia Clay, new plants manager at Monrovia. “The blooms cover the shrubs throughout the summer, and the plants are



GreatMyrtle 'Cherry Delight'



Many varieties of crape myrtle sport colorful foliage in the fall.



These crape myrtles have experienced "crape murder," as evidenced by the large, knuckle-like formations on their trunks.

compact, which makes them perfect for smaller landscapes."

But crape myrtles are about more than just pretty flowers.

"Frankly, I choose my plants for interest beyond the summer," Armitage says. "Of course, the blooms are beautiful, but some varieties have foliage that turns scarlet, orange or yellow in the fall and exfoliating bark that stands out in the winter."

Depending on the cultivar, the bark can be cream, tan or cinnamon-colored, and it will curl as it separates from the trunk.

## Successful growing

Crape myrtles do best in full sun, no matter what the variety. They also thrive in well-drained soil but require deep watering weekly until they are established. A light application of a slow-release fertilizer in the spring will encourage growth and bloom production.

"One of the biggest issues with crape myrtles is powdery mildew, a fungus that affects the foliage and blooms," Armitage says. "Typically, the leaves, buds or flowers will be covered with a gray-white dust; the leaves may also curl slightly. It's more likely to happen when there's not enough air circulation or in very humid conditions."

Powdery mildew can be treated with a fungicide; follow the package instructions for mixing and applying.

"If a crape has a serious infection, it's better to dig up the plant, discard it and purchase a replacement," Armitage says.

In general, crape myrtles are reliable, long-lived plants that are easy to care for and have very few concerns about pests or disease. And with breeders creating even more disease-resistant varieties, their care is sure to become even easier.

Today's new crapes are much more versatile than in your grandmother's day. Whether you use them as foundation plants, a privacy screen or focal-point specimens planted in containers or flower beds, they can create a wow factor with very little effort. 🍏

*Pamela A. Keene is a Master Gardener and freelance writer living in Flowery Branch.*