

How to *grow* crape myrtle trees



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Crape myrtle (sometimes spelled as “crepe myrtle”) is an exotic beauty that boasts large, colorful blooms in late summer. The traditional southern spelling is “crepe” myrtle because the delicate flowers resemble crepe paper.

Question: What can you tell me about growing crape myrtle trees in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: Crape myrtle (sometimes spelled as “crepe myrtle”) is an exotic beauty that boasts large, colorful blooms in late summer.

The traditional southern spelling is “crepe” myrtle because the delicate flowers resemble crepe paper. It is a member of the Lythraceae family. The genus is Lagerstroemia, named after Magnus von Lagerstrom (1691-1759), a Swedish merchant and friend of Linnaeus.

Native to China and Korea, Lagerstroemia has been grown there as an ornamental for over 2,000 years. In North America, crape myrtle was first documented in South Carolina in 1750. From there, its cultivation spread up to the milder parts of the east coast, across the south to the west coast, and into the hot-summer parts of California.

The first crape myrtles to reach western Oregon were likely brought from California in the early twentieth century.

If you are considering



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adding crape myrtles to your landscape, here are a few pointers that will make them a success.

First, it is all about the location! Take an assessment of your garden and note where the warmest and brightest areas are. A southern exposure, preferably against a wall or the side of your house, is good. Even better is a stone patio area or next to the driveway. The reflected heat from the stone surface will make crape myrtles very happy.

Crape myrtles abhor shade and will grow poorly or not flower in a situation that receives less than six hours of sun. Consistently high temperatures (80s and 90s F) in early summer produce the best flowering years. Once bloom has commenced, it often continues for a month or more in the earliest selections.

Crape myrtle isn't too particular about soil, but it should be well-drained.



If blooms and foliage aren't enough to impress you, here is the attractive feature you'll enjoy all winter long: the exfoliating bark in a variety of colors, from subtle pale tones to rich orange.

Of course, adding some compost to the planting hole will be an added benefit and help the plants grow better and faster.

Crape myrtle needs water in order to give you those delicious blooms. Our drastically dry summers here do not supply the moisture they need. Crape myrtles respond well to deep watering – that means not depending on a sprinkler system that probably only gives enough water to barely penetrate the surface but a bucketful or two to make sure the water seeps way down into the ground.

One time per week should be enough.

Crape myrtles bloom on

new wood so you want to prune at the beginning of the season. Generally, removing any dead, crossing or damaged branches as well as trimming back the branches only a foot or so is all that is needed.

Do some research before you shop, and read the labels carefully. Flower color is an option to consider. Generally, colors are in the red, purple, pink and white ranges. Foliage can also be quite different with some varieties having green leaves and others red or burgundy.

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Newer varieties are being introduced every year. Here are some suggestions:

■ Lagerstroemia xfauriei 'Hopi' forms a large rounded shrub to ten feet tall. It is one of the most drought-tolerant cultivars and is consistently the earliest to flower in our climate – often by mid-July continuing through September, even in cooler than average summers. In autumn, it becomes a glorious vivid orange, holding its foliage for up to a month before dropping. Exfoliating bark sheds to reveal light pink and cream tones.

■ Lagerstroemia xfauriei 'Osage' has the most spectacular bark of any tree in cultivation. Serpentine patches of cinnamon red are outlined in white. In early August, it produces clear pink flowers in huge trusses that bend under their own weight, giving the tree a pendulous character. Autumn color is deep red and orange, and long lasting. It becomes a spreading tree to eighteen feet tall.

■ Lagerstroemia xfauriei 'Tuskegee' offers spectacular flower color and an unusual wide-spreading habit, which makes it ideal as a specimen tree. To twenty feet tall and eventually as wide, it produces an abundance of intense, dark raspberry red flowers, beginning in mid-August and continuing through September. Its bark peels to a soft sandalwood and tan. Autumn color is a long-lasting combination of red and orange.

Crape myrtles in all sizes, shapes, and colors, await discovery by Umpqua Valley gardeners. It is the perfect tree to fit into any garden landscape. It looks great in all four seasons – what more could you want?

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.