Extension Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION Winter 2014

Empowering gardeners. Providing garden solutions.

in this issue

Crape myrtle pruning

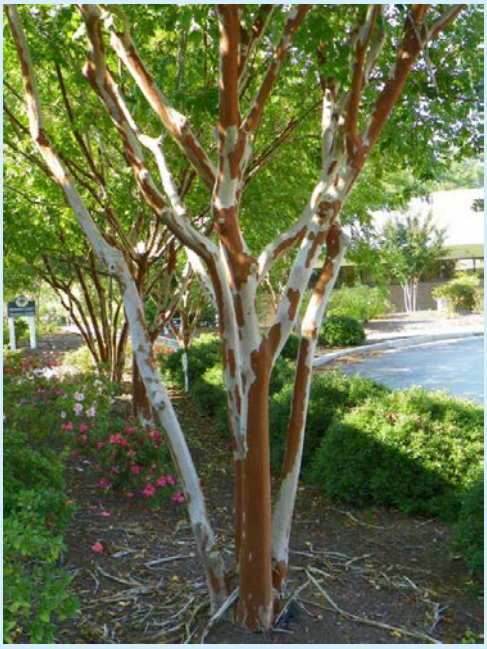
Crape myrtles should be purchased based on the mature size and form needed for the landscape site. Varieties of crape myrtle ranging from less than 2 feet to greater than 40 feet high are available. All varieties can be grouped into one of three categories based on how they were pruned at the nursery: shrubs, multi-stem trees, and single stem trees. Cultivars that grow less than 10 feet tall are often grown as multi-stemmed shrubs with multiple branches all the way to the ground. Taller growing cultivars with either single or multiple main stems are usually limbed-up to create small to medium trees. Future pruning should follow the training begun at the nursery.

Crape myrtles trained as small trees are often improperly pruned, using a method known as topping. Topping involves removing a major portion of a limb. This leaves behind a stub that is slow to heal and may result in decay. Topping results in numerous weak sprouts that bend under the weight of flowers and often break when blown or weighed down by rain, snow, or ice.

Crape myrtles are often topped because they have grown too large for their location. Know the mature size of the crape myrtle you are purchasing and place it in an appropriate location. That way it can grow freely without the added work of pruning. When planting near a structure, place large growing varieties 15 to 20 feet from a wall.

Another reason often cited for topping is to maintain a view. But when topped, the flush of a low, bushy-growth tree inhibits the view even more than an untopped tree does. You can create views through or under a crape myrtle by removing lower limbs and thinning to enhance its form as a small, open tree.

Because they flower on new growth, crape myrtles are pruned in winter. Winter pruning does not have to be heavy. If needed, small shrub-form crape myrtles can be pruned to keep them compact and tidy. Larger growing tree-form varieties should be pruned to remove suckers, dead branches, and crossing branches. Cutting out low hanging branches enhances the trunk's beauty.



The trunks of a properly pruned tree form crape myrtle (variety 'Natchez'). ©*Charlotte Glen*

Summer pruning of a crape myrtle should take place after flowering and be limited to removing suckers at the base of the trunk and possibly removing faded blooms on small plants. Removing faded blooms reduces the weight on the ends of branches. This can result in another set of flowers and help prevent breakage of limbs.

Be careful whom you take advice or direction from when pruning. Don't follow a practice you see someone else doing unless you know the reason they are doing it.

— Danny Lauderdale

NC State University A&T State University COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Empowering People · Providing Solutions

Extension Showcase

Grilling & Chilling Workshop

The "Grilling & Chilling" Workshop in Rutherford County is a successful local foods initiative that began over 10 years ago with a focus on local commodities and food safety, combined with local chefs, growers, and consumers.

The workshop highlights local and regionally produced commodities, including fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, and dairy products.

Each year the commodity mix, preparation, and cooking techniques are chosen with the consumer in mind. Demonstrating new cooking techniques—such as grilling, oven-roasting, baking, freezing, or chilling—encourages consumers to adopt the same techniques in their family's food preparation.

Coupling the demonstrations with a focus on different aspects of agricultural production, such as value-added products, agritourism, youth involvement in agriculture, specialty crops, and community supported agriculture (CSA), results in increased community awareness of local agriculture. Consumers benefit by learning how to select, prepare, and use products. Growers benefit from increased product visibility and new marketing opportunities. A definite win-win for both!

Benefits of this program include participants using healthier foods, trying a new food or cooking technique, and expanded purchasing of local produce from our Rutherford County Farmers' Market.

— Jan McGuinn

Smart Gardening — *Adding mulch for winter*

Spring is the time when most people think of spreading mulch in the landscape. Adding mulch in the spring helps prevent moisture stress to plants during the summer and can be an attractive addition to the yard. Fall and early winter mulching can also benefit plants in the landscape in several ways.

While most plants are dropping their leaves and going dormant, evergreen plants will continue to lose water through their leaves during winter. Mulching around evergreens will help preserve moisture around the root system and prevent desiccation injury if we have a dry winter.

bigstockphoto.com

Another reason to add a mulch layer in winter is the same reason we add it in the spring—to suppress weeds. Chickweed, henbit, and other winter annuals thrive in our landscapes during winter. Adding mulch will keep these problem weeds to a minimum and make pulling weeds much easier.

Temperature fluctuations during the winter cause the soil to warm and freeze. These fluctuations can cause to soil to heave, which can damage root systems and even push small plants out of the ground. Adding a mulch layer will maintain more constant soil temperature and reduce soil heaving.

Adding a mulch layer can also help protect sensitive plants that may not be able to tolerate extremely cold temperatures. Some gardeners pile mulch around cold sensitive roses or cover their strawberries with straw. This mulch layer insulates the plants from cold temperatures. Make sure to remove the mulch from covered plants in early spring just before they start to grow.

What type of mulch should you use? Most experts recommend that some type of organic mulch be applied during the fall and winter. Straw, pine needles, and bark mulches are all acceptable winter mulches. Adding a 2- to 3-inch layer should be adequate to protect plants during a normal winter.

— Bill Hanlin

Food Production — *Saving seeds*

Are you one of those avid gardeners who like to save your own garden seed? If not, there are many reasons to do so. One is to maintain true-to-type heirloom varieties. Another is to save money by not having to purchase next year's seed. One of the major reasons is that people just like to see if they can save seed.

Commonly saved seeds include bean, cantaloupe, corn, cucumber, lettuce, pea, pepper, pumpkin, squash, tomato, and watermelon. Limit seed saving to open-pollinated varieties of vegetable plants. Seeds of open-pollinated varieties stay true to type, producing plants identical to their parents. Avoid saving seed from hybrid vegetable plants. Hybrid varieties are bred by seed companies for specific traits such as disease resistance or large fruits. Hybrid seeds produce the same species, but seedlings will be genetically different than their parents.

bigstockphoto.com

To collect seed, pick the largest, healthiest vegetables from which to extract seed. I know it is hard to forfeit your best few specimens. But if you want the best plants with the best traits next year, you must. Allow the fruit, pod, or seed head to ripen fully, then pick and remove the seeds. Allow seeds to dry completely before storing.

Storage is best in an airtight container, preferably a glass jar. You can place dried seeds in labeled zip-lock bags or small envelopes, but then place the packets in a glass jar. Before sealing the lid, place a silica gel packet (such as those often found in pill bottles) inside the jar to absorb excess moisture. Keeping the seeds dry is a must. Seeds keep longer if placed in the refrigerator or freezer. If stored correctly, most seeds will keep three to five years.

— Lenny Rogers

Pest Alert — *Emerald ash borer*

Considered the most destructive forest pest ever seen in North America, emerald ash borer (EAB) was found in North Carolina for the first time this summer. This damaging pest attacks all four species of *Fraxinus*, commonly known as ash, that are native to North Carolina. This does not include the mountain ash, a species of *Sorbus*.

Leah Bauer, USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station, Bugwood.org

Adult emerald ash borers are ½-inch long, cigar-shaped, metallic-green beetles. Their larvae feed underneath the bark of ash trees, cutting off the supply of water and nutrients to the leaves. Initial symptoms of an infestation include high woodpecker activity and D-shaped holes in the bark. As feeding progresses, large branches die and suckers sprout from the base of the tree. Infested trees usually die within a couple of years. Applying pesticides to prevent or cure an infestation is rarely effective or recommended.

While adults can fly at least ½-mile from where they hatched, they are also spread by people. Movement of firewood from quarantined areas has been one of the main ways the insect has spread.

The future of ash trees is uncertain. Like chestnut blight and the hemlock woolly adelgid, this pest has the power to change the composition of our forests and landscapes. If you suspect that you have EAB, contact your local Extension center. For more information on EAB, visit this site: http://go.ncsu.edu/mugrzs

— Amanda Taylor

Carolina Lawns — *Winter chores*

The majority of lawns in the mountains are made up of fescue, a cool-season grass. Taking care of a couple of maintenance items during late winter and early spring can make all the difference for a beautiful green lawn in spring and summer.

The first is to fertilizer your lawn in February. A soil test should be conducted every two to three years to determine exactly how much lime should be applied, as well as the rates of N (nitrogen), P (phosphorus), and K (potassium) needed. You can pick up a soil test kit from any NC Cooperative Extension center. If you do not have recent soil test results, use a complete fertilizer with an N-P-K ratio of 4:1:2 or 4:1:3.

Next up is an application of lime to "sweeten," or increase the pH, of our acidic NC soils if your soil pH is below 6.5 to 7.0. If your stand of grass is thin, you can overseed in late February or Early March. The best time to do this is when it snows. Broadcast the seed on top of the snow. The snow will allow you to see where you have seeded as well as moisten the seed to allow germination. And when the snow melts, it will carry the seed into direct contact with the soil.

Last on your to-do list is to apply a broadleaf weed killer in February or March if you have weeds such as chickweed and henbit. If crabgrass is a problem in your lawn in summer, apply a crabgrass preventer in early March with your fertilizer application. Most crabgrass preventers should not be used on newly seeded grass. Learn more about turf care at this site: www.turffiles.ncsu.edu .

— Elizabeth Ayers

Tips & Tasks

Lawns

- Apply crabgrass preventer on cool-season lawns in late winter.
- Fertilize cool-season lawns with a slow-release lawn fertilizer.
- Spray wild onion and garlic with a herbicide containing 2,4-D.
- Sharpen lawn mower blades before using your mower in the spring.

Ornamentals

- Prune fruit trees and grape vines for optimum fruit production.
- Prune established blueberries by taking out one-third of the oldest canes at ground level.
- Prune summer flowering shrubs—such as crape myrtle, rose of Sharon, and butterfly bush— in late winter.
- Prune roses before bud break.
- Deadhead pansies to prolong flowering.

Edibles

- Plant asparagus crowns when the soil is dry enough to work.
- Plant early season vegetables such as English peas, onions, Irish potatoes, and spinach.
- Order garden seeds such as beans, corn, and okra.
- Make sure all debris is cleared out of the vegetable garden.
- Draw a garden plan to include crop rotation of disease-sensitive vegetables such as tomatoes.

— Donna Teasley

Extension Gardener

Around the State

Showstopper — *Chinese pistache*

Tough as nails, drought tolerant, and pest free are all terms used to describe Chinese pistache, *Pistacia chinensis*. This beautiful medium-sized tree is perfect for home landscapes and urban environments in USDA hardiness zones 6 to 9. Though awkward and somewhat unruly when young, Chinese pistache develops into an outstanding specimen tree with an umbrella shaped crown.

At maturity, this tree reaches a height of 40 feet and a spread of 25 to 35 feet. Chinese pistache has finely divided, lustrous green foliage during the summer months and terrific fiery orange and red fall color. This plant will flourish in nearly every soil type as long as it is well drained and does best in full sun. Transplant one into your landscape—you'll be glad you did.

— John Vining

Helping You Grow

Extension Master Gardener Volunteers

The NC Extension Master Gardener Volunteer (EMGV) program disseminates horticultural knowledge to the residents of each county by training volunteers to extend the reach of the local Extension staff. To become an EMGV, you must first complete a 12- to 16-week training course. Most counties offer training in the late winter or spring. Once initial training is complete, participants must complete a 40-hour internship that could include answering gardening questions, serving as a school garden mentor, being part of a speakers' bureau, leading garden tours, and much more. To find out more, visit www.ncstategardening.org or contact your local Extension center.

— Kerrie Roach

Edibles — *Sprouts*

It is easy to grow nutritious sprouts indoors anytime of year. All you need is a clear canning jar, a jar ring, a soft piece of nylon screen to cover the jar's mouth, tap water, and sprouting seeds. Sprouting seeds lack the coating of pesticide found on some garden seed and can be purchased online or at food stores. To start a batch of sprouts, measure out two to four tablespoons of seeds such as lentils or alfalfa in a quart size jar. Add a cup of clean tap water. Let the seeds soak a couple of hours, then drain. Store the jar on its side in a cabinet. Once a day, open the lid to rinse and drain the seeds. After the seeds sprout, repeat the daily rinsing and draining but store the jar in indirect sunlight. As the sprouts turn green, transfer them to a storage container kept in the refrigerator for use within three to five days.

— Thomas Campbell

Sustainability — *Vermicomposting*

Vermicomposting turns kitchen waste into a nutritious soil for plants. When mixed with soil, vermicompost enhances its structure, drainage, and moisture-holding capacity. Vermicompost is also teeming with beneficial microorganisms and enzymes, and contains plant growth hormones and humic acids that can increase rates of germination, growth, flowering, and fruiting in crops, usually independent of nutrient availability. In addition, vermicompost can decrease attacks by plant pathogens, parasitic nematodes, and arthropod pests.

The materials for starting a vermicomposting system are simple. All you need are a worm bin, bedding, water, composting earthworms, and food scraps. Either buy a manufactured worm bin or make your own out of wooden or a plastic storage container. Drill holes in the upper sides of the bin for air flow and in the bottom for drainage; do not drill holes in the lid. Place your worm bin indoors or outside, but try to keep the temperature above 55°F and below 85°F. Fill the bin half way with moist, fluffy bedding such as shredded paper, brown leaves, or coconut coir. Add at least one pound of *Eisenia fetida* earthworms, commonly called red wigglers, that you purchased from a worm grower.

To feed your worms, place small amounts of kitchen scraps in the bin and always cover the food completely with a couple inches of bedding. Do not stir the contents of the worm bin. After four months, harvest the vermicompost that has accumulated on the bottom of the worm bin. For instructions on how to do this and more details about setting up and maintaining a worm bin, visit this site: http://worms.ncsu.edu

— Rhonda Sherman

NC State University A&T State University COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Empowering People · Providing Solutions
www.ces.ncsu.edu

Extension Gardener provides timely, research-based horticultural information. We publish four issues per year. Send comments about ***Extension Gardener*** to:

Editor and Team Leader
Lucy Bradley, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, Urban Horticulture
Box 7609, NC State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-7609

Managing Editor: **Charlotte Glen**
Content Editor: **David Goforth**
Regional Editors, Coastal Plain and Sandhills: **Shawn Banks**
Regional Editor, Piedmont: **Randy Fulk**
Regional Editor, Mountains and Foothills: **Donna Teasley**
Production Editor and Designer: **Viki Balkcum**

The use of brand names does not imply endorsement by N.C. Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned.

Distributed in furtherance of the acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.

©North Carolina Cooperative Extension. ***Extension Gardener*** may not be reproduced without written permission. Any news media using sections of the newsletter should credit "*Extension Gardener*, North Carolina Cooperative Extension."

14-CALS-4093—12/13

http://extensiongardener.ncsu.edu