Crape Murder

Have you noticed your crapemyrtles looking a little scraggly this winter? Are you ready to call the landscaper, or get out there with a chainsaw and do some pruning? If this sounds like you, stop where you are, put the phone down, hit the kill switch on the chainsaw, and please keep reading.

Crape murder is a serious offense. One punishable by death I have heard. Crape murder is characterized by the indiscriminate ‘pruning’ of large leaders, the use of a chainsaw, and the removal of more than fifty percent of the plant. If you or anyone you know has committed, or is suspected of committing crape murder, please contact your local Extension horticultural agent right away, and again, please keep reading.

Many homeowners commit crape murder for one of three reasons: the tree is too large for the space, they believe that severe pruning is required for flower set, or they see their neighbor, or their neighbor’s landscaper, doing it and believe they should follow suit. There may be some instances where heavy pruning is required, but these are few and far between.

Crapemyrtles are generally a low maintenance plant. Choosing the right variety for the location is the best way to get started. From dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties that may only reach eight feet tall to your run of the mill crapemyrtle that can get upwards of thirty feet, there is a size that will fit most spaces. By choosing the correct variety for the location, you can avoid the heavy pruning due to space constraints.

A plant has one goal in its life and that is to reproduce. In order for that plant to reproduce, it must flower and produce seeds. By severely pruning a crapemyrtle you send the plant into shock. When this happens, the plant will produce a heavy flower show on watersprouts (vigorous shoot growth originating from limbs) and numerous suckers (vigorous shoot growth originating from the base of the plant). Yes, the resulting flower show is pretty, but what about the watersprouts and suckers? The watersprouts generally have a weak attachment to the main stem, and if the limb becomes too heavy it will easily break. Suckers become an unsightly mass at the base of the plant. To top it off, all of this vigorous growth takes enormous amounts of energy from the plant. Pruning for a flower show will not only severely decrease the lifetime of your plant, but your average crapemyrtle will bloom for 90 days from start to finish without pruning.
I often refer to the ‘neighbor effect’ when talking about landscaping. Just because Bob Smith did it, does not mean that Joe Brown should follow suit. This also applies to their landscape contractor. Many people will see a landscape crew hacking away at crapemyrtles and say to themselves, “Oh, that must be the right way to do it.” I will bet you good money that the landscaper was specifically asked to hack the trees, and that deep down inside they are cringing at each cut. You have to remember, landscapers are paid to do a job that is specified by the consumer.

So next weekend when your neighbor is out there hacking away at his crapemyrtle with the chainsaw, please do not follow suit. Lead by example and do a light pruning in late winter. Prune off the suckers that are coming from the roots, get rid of any crossing or rubbing branches that are growing inward, and remove anything that is diseased or damaged. You may also want to remove some of the lower limbs to create more of a tree shape. This practice is called “limbing up.” But please whatever you do, do not become a crape murderer!

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, Extension horticultural agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu, or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.