

Crepe Myrtles FOR CENTRAL FLORIDA

By Eric Schmidt

Crepe Myrtles refer to a group of flowering shrubs and trees that belong to the genus *Lagerstroemia*. There are 50 species of *Lagerstroemia* native to areas of southern China and southeastern Asia. They belong to the Lythraceae Family. They get their common name as the flower petals are crinkled and crepe-like. Only a few species are commonly cultivated, but dozens of hybrids and cultivars exist.

The most commonly grown species is *L. indica*. It is native from southern China to Thailand. It has been grown as an ornamental in Asia for centuries and is a popular ornamental in the southern United States. Recent breeding has produced many varieties with a full range of heights. Some remain 3-5 feet tall while others can grow up to 30 feet tall. Crepe Myrtles are deciduous and lose their leaves in winter. They begin flowering in late spring or early summer and flower until fall. The flowers are produced in terminal panicles and range in color from white to pink, red, and lavender, depending on the variety. The trunks are attractive and have exfoliating bark. This feature is especially noticeable in winter when the plant is bare.

Crepe Myrtles are easy to grow. They flower best in full, hot sun with a well drained soil. They are drought tolerant once established but grow and flower better if irrigation is provided during extremely dry periods. A light layer of mulch is beneficial. Fertilize three times a year with a balanced garden fertilizer.

Crepe Myrtles require little pruning. They should not be pruned back heavily in late winter or spring, a practice that is often observed and is known as “crepe murder”. It is not healthy for the tree as it spoils the shape of the tree and does not allow it to develop a strong branching system. It



Queen crepe myrtle (*L. speciosa*)

encourages weak growth which can break apart during storms. Generally, don't cut any branches thicker than a pencil. Some exceptions include removing suckers, removing cross branches, and thinning out the canopy for good air circulation. Old seed pods can also be removed but just trim immediately under the pods. Pruning them off in spring before the first flowers does not appear to make them flower sooner but removing them after the first bloom period in summer can encourage new flowering. Crepe Myrtles often grow multi-trunked but can be pruned to a single stem. If they are pruned because they are growing too tall for the location, then the wrong variety was planted. Refer to the chart at the end of the article for suitable varieties and heights.

Another species is *L. fauriei*. It is known as the Japanese or Copperbark Crepe Myrtle and is native to the Ryukyu Islands at the southern tip of Japan. This is a large growing tree, reaching 30-40 feet tall. It bears small panicles of white flowers in summer. The trunks are very ornamental as they exfoliate several times a year revealing a

L. indica 'Burgundy Cotton'

dark reddish brown bark. Japanese Crepe Myrtle has been used in breeding with *L. indica* and several dozen hybrids have been released, many named after Native American tribes. Many of these hybrids are commonly found in nurseries and are vigorous growers. *L. fauriei* is resistant to powdery mildew and this trait has been passed on to the hybrids.

A third species is the Queen Crepe Myrtle, *L. speciosa*. It is a tropical species more suited to southern Florida but can be grown in protected microclimates in the warmer sections of central Florida. It can grow as a large tree, 30-50 feet tall. In central Florida it is usually much shorter as it will freeze back below about 29-30 degrees F. It bears large panicles of light purple flowers and has large leaves up to 10 inches long. 'Nong Nooch Pink' bears hot pink flowers while 'Alba' bears white flowers. There is also a hybrid with *L. indica* called 'Majestic Orchid' that bears pinkish purple flowers. It only grows 8-10 feet tall and is hardier than *L. speciosa*, tolerating temperatures into the lower 20sF.

A couple other hardy species that may be encountered and are also being used in creating hybrids with *L. indica* are *L. limii* and *L. subcostata*. *Lagerstroemia limii* is a shrubby growing species from southern China.

It grows 7-9 feet tall and bears lavender colored flowers. *Lagerstroemia subcostata* bears pinkish white flowers and can grow 8-10 feet tall. It is native to southern China, southern Japan and Taiwan.



Lagerstroemia fauriei ▲

L. indica 'Basham's Party Pink' ▼



THESE ARE SOME RECOMMENDED CULTIVARS AND HYBRIDS OF *L. indica* and *L. fauriei* WITH HEIGHT AND FLOWER COLOR

UNDER 5 FEET TALL

L. indica

- 'Cherry Dazzle' - bright red
- 'Snow Dazzle' - white
- 'Tightwad Red' - dark red
- 'Velma's Royal Delight' - purple

L. indica x fauriei

- 'Chickasaw' - lavender pink
- 'Pocomoke' - rose pink

6 to 10 FEET TALL

L. indica

- 'Burgundy Cotton' - white (buds and new growth is burgundy colored)
- 'Catawba' - dark purple
- 'Siren Red' - red

L. indica x fauriei

- 'Acoma' - white (has a semi-weeping growth habit)
- 'Hopi' - pink
- 'Tonto' - hot pink

11 to 15 FEET TALL

L. indica

- 'Peppermint Lace' - rose pink edged in white
- 'Potomac' - pink
- 'Red Rocket' - dark red
- 'Royal Velvet' - bright pink (has burgundy new growth, also known as 'Pink Velour')
- 'Watermelon Red' - red

L. indica x fauriei

- 'Apalachee' - light lavender
- 'Lipan' - purple
- 'Osage' - light pink
- 'Sioux' - dark pink



16 to 20 FEET TALL

L. indica

- 'Byers Wonderful White' - white
- 'Dynamite' - bright red
- 'Near East' - pink

L. indica x fauriei

- 'Choctaw' - bright pink
- 'Comanche' - coral pink

20 to 30 FEET TALL

L. indica

- 'Basham's Party Pink' - lavender pink

L. indica x fauriei

- 'Biloxi' - pale pink
- 'Miami' - dark pink
- 'Muskogee' - light lavender
- 'Natchez' - white

L. fauriei

- 'Fantasy' - white
- 'Townhouse' - white