

Each time I travel to see my parents after Christmas, I approach my neighborhood like a lion stalking its prey on the African plain. I am not looking to frighten or pounce on anything; rather, I fearfully gaze down rows of houses in the neighborhood. I am trying to determine if another murder has been committed on Kathy Circle – a murder of a crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*).

As I approach our house, my eyes scan with my fingers crossed hoping my dad has not, like other neighbors, pulled out the chainsaw just yet. Maybe, I can save our crape myrtles from, ‘crape murder’ – a term coined by Southern Living Magazine years ago describing this abusive method of pruning. But like Peyton Manning in big games, I cannot do it all. (I say that with a heavy heart because I really, really wanted him to win the Super Bowl this week.)

According to LSU AgriCenter Horticulturalist, Rick Bogren, the trend in pruning crape myrtles is to “lop off the tops.” The result is a tree that appears like an upside down broom. Even worse, this style of pruning year after year results in unsightly knobs forming at the point of pruning.

The method of cutting back limbs to the same spot each year is called “pollarding.” This is purposefully done on some tree types and in certain situations; nonetheless, why is this method so often used on crape myrtles, knowing it produces a weak structure more susceptible to disease and insects?

One reason is because, well, crape myrtles do not die. They essentially survive this murderous pruning which would kill or severely injure countless other trees. We must understand that this technique shortens the life and destroys the natural beauty of the tree.

Another reason crape myrtles are pruned this way is to maintain them at a lower height. The problem here is some varieties grow taller than others. If a smaller tree is desired, then we need to focus on proper tree selection for that site. So, what is the correct way to prune our crape myrtles?

To prune crape myrtles properly, it must first be determined if they need pruning at all. If there is not a good reason to prune the tree, then leave it alone. If you see something that needs pruning, study the tree carefully and prune for a specific purpose.

Removing suckers, old seed pods, dead, crossing and low branches are examples of appropriate reasons for pruning. Suckers are succulent sprouts that grow from the base of the tree and need to be removed throughout the season. Eliminating rubbing or crossing branches improves the overall shape. If you cut back large branches, remove them to the base or the trunk of the tree.

It is a myth that pruning is essential for flowering. Crape myrtles flower on new growth of the season, so you can prune plants any time during the late winter or early spring without loss of flower buds. Remember, pruning does force new growth and should not be done before frost in the fall.

This pruning tragedy is why many crape myrtles today look like pom-poms on stalks. In an effort to make up for seasons without pruning, it is easy to start sawing back tree limbs. It is okay to ‘severely prune’ a tree, even a crape myrtle, as long as this is accomplished just before spring growth begins. However, it is best to remove no more than one fourth of the growth of the any ornamental tree.

For my family, as long as Peyton Manning remains in the post-season, there is no time for anyone to butcher crape myrtles in the yard. We have three beautiful ones still holding their natural form. Just as Ms. Travers saved Mr. Banks in *Mary Poppins*, I am doing the best I can to save those crape myrtles.

Information for this article was taken from "Don't 'Murder' Your Crape Myrtles" and UGA Publication "Crape Myrtle Culture." For additional questions, contact Thomas County Extension Office at 225-4130.