

“CRAPE MURDER” & OTHER GARDENERS’ DILEMMAS

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY William Johnson



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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Excessive pruning of crape myrtles typically results in weakly-attached, spindly branches. Excessive pruning is not a healthy procedure for any landscape tree. Horticulturists sometimes refer to this assault on the crape myrtle as “crape murder.”

Question: My neighbor and many other folks are pruning their crape myrtles now. Is this a good practice?

Answer: It’s almost an annual ritual during this time of year in Texas to “top” crape myrtles, and yes, crape myrtles are very hardy landscape trees even under such management practices. However, severe topping is not a healthy procedure for any landscape tree. Topping stimulates

the production of numerous sprouts near the pruned end of branches. These new sprouts are very likely to be weakly attached and spindly in growth. They will droop later in the growing season when heavy rains occur and/or when flower production is heavy. Moreover, after repeated episodes of pruning back to the same area of the trunk, the pruning site often develops

unsightly, knotty growths. Horticulturists sometimes refer to this assault on the crape myrtle as “crape murder.” To correct the problem, remove all but one or two of the new branches on a main trunk. Later in the spring season, select the strongest upright branch as the new leader and cut off the others so energy produced by the plant will be concentrated in the

new leader rather than divided among four, five or even a dozen new branches.

Finally, next year do NOT top the crape myrtle regardless what you see your neighbors or professional landscapers do. We can excuse the neighbor for not knowing but a professional landscaper should know better.

If you plan to include or to replace crape myrtles as part of a new landscape but space is a limiting factor, consider selecting a dwarf variety. You would not be tempted to perform the ritual of "topping" and your crape myrtles would provide a pleasing design as well as color to the landscape.

Question: I am new to this area and plan to start a garden. The soil is a heavy clay. What would you consider to be the most important step in improving this stuff?

Answer: Welcome to the club. The most common soil type in the area is clay—it's affectionately called gumbo clay. Some gardeners call it 12-inch clay—if you take 12 steps in it, you're likely to have 12 inches of soil adhering to each foot!

Yes, gumbo clay soil can be tough to work. Without a doubt, the addition of organic matter would be the most important thing a gardener can do to improve gumbo. Organic matter worked into the gumbo clay improves soil texture and thus makes the soil easier to work.

The addition of organic matter also supplies many needed plant nutrients; improves the conditions for the development of beneficial organisms such as earthworms; slows leaching of soil nutrients; and speeds excess water movement and drainage through the soil.

I have seen numerous gardeners who started out with tough gumbo and over time achieve a very workable and fertile soil. However, you must add organic matter on regular basis to achieve the same end results. Lawn clippings, leaves, manure and shredded pine bark are excellent sources of organic matter. You should also consider starting a compost to efficiently recycle your garden and landscape waste.

Question: With all this warm weather my grass has begun to grow again. Can I go ahead and fertilize my St. Augustine lawn now using a slow release fertilizer?

Answer: The mild weather we have been experiencing has even caused some trees to bud out two to three weeks earlier than normal. It can be very tempting to begin projects such as fertilizing much earlier than recommended.

Some homeowners started fertilizing their lawns in January which is not recommended as lawn grass will make poor utilization of the nitrogen at that time of the year. Fertilizing the lawn should be postponed un-

til the lawn can make better use of the fertilizer (generally around mid-March to early April). Use of slow release fertilizers is highly recommended.

Question: I live in Galveston and have to deal with very sandy soil. Would adding organic matter to sandy soil be of any benefit?

Answer: Organic matter worked into the garden soil will help improve the soil texture, and increase the water holding capacity of sandy soils. As with clay soils, organic matter also supplies many needed plant nutrients and improves the condition for the development of beneficial organisms such as earthworms and slows leaching of valuable nutrients.

