SELECTION AND PROPAGATION OF CRAPE MYRTLE

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What plant other than my favorite, *Lagerstroemia indica*, blooms about 100 days most years, in a color range from deep red to pink, lavender, and white? Name another that has such beautiful fall colors and outstanding bark characteristics and grows in so many different sizes and forms. Crape myrtle is truly one of the world's best and most adaptable plants.

Found originally in China, *Lagerstroemia* was named by Linnaeus in 1759 to honor his friend, Magnus von Lagerstroem, a naturalist who was a director of the Swedish East Indies Company. Late in the 18th century, crape myrtle was brought to this country, and George Washington was an early admirer and collector.

Many, many selections have been made throughout the years. The ones described herein are favorites that we have grown and seen flourish across the southern U.S. for years. This information is based on observations and is not the result of scholarly work or well-designed experimentation. Because crape myrtle is subject to problems of climate, producers in other areas will disagree wtih these evaluations at times.

There is no shortage of excellent red cultivars. Each part of the South seems to have its own.

'Regal Red' crape myrtle is a seedling selection made by my father, Marcus Byers in the late 1960's. The flower color is deep red, one of the darkest of all. A broader grower, 'Regal Red' is not as tall as some but is a fine choice for the profusion of flowers that are showy from late July until frost. Adequately winter hardy, it is moderately resistant to powdery mildew.

'William Toovey' is an old selection, made by Howell Nursery Company in 1927. It has a pinkish-red flower, sometimes called watermelon red, and is a very heavy bloomer. Usually its height is about 12 ft., and the habit of growth is broad and spreading.

'Byers Standard Red' has a fine rose-red bloom. An old-time favorite, this is our tallest growing and best tree form red cultivar.

'Victor' is a cadillac crape myrtle. It is a compact, bright red cultivar that grows to about 3 ft high and wide. When planted in large masses, they give the appearance of 'Hino-crimson' azaleas in bloom all summer long. Red stems and

buds add to this effect. 'Victor' is one of the hardiest crape myrtle cultivars we have seen.

'Tuscarora' is a red selection from a cross of *L. indica* × *L. fauriei* 'Basham's Party Pink' × *L. indica* 'Cherokee'. It was introduced by the U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, D.C., in 1980 and is said to be highly mildew-resistant. This plant was featured in full color on the cover of the "American Nurseryman" magazine and is in strong demand at this time. Although it is still new with us, I have some concern about its ability to stand very cold weather. Other red cultivars worth mentioning are 'Carolina Beauty', 'Dallas Red', and 'Okmulgee'. 'Cherokee' is an introduction of the U.S. National Arboretum and apparently is an excellent plant, but it has been confused in the trade from the start, and I hesitate to recommend it.

There are many good crape myrtles in other colors, too.

'Byers Wonderful White' is another of my father's long-ago selections. Its upright form and clear white, basketball-size flower clusters make this the standard white cultivar in the South. This is the most winter-hardy crape myrtle we have seen. A very tall grower, it exhibits yellow fall leaf colors.

'Natchez' is one of the best choices to come from the breeding work at the U.S. National Arboretum. It is a very vigorous grower with lots of medium-sized white flowers and high resistance to mildew. 'Natchez' originated in 1964 from a cross of *L. indica* and *L. fauriei*. As a result of the *L. fauriei* influence, a spectacular feature is the exfoliating dark cinnamon-brown trunk bark. Dr. Egolf gets an A+ for 'Natchez'.

'Near East' is an introduction of Overlook Nurseries of Mobile, Alabama. The shell-pink flowers are beautiful. They appear usually a few weeks later than most crape myrtle and the plant seems to be less than vigorous. It exhibits a bushy form and is less hardy then most. 'Near East' is featured at Callaway Gardens in Georgia.

'Potomac' is my favorite of all crape myrtles. The upright form and heavy caliper make this the perfect tree crape myrtle. Clear pink flowers, much like 'Coral Belle' azalea blooms, are early and abundant. It was introduced in 1967 by the U.S. National Arboretum.

'Conestoga' is one more fine plant from the U.S. National Arboretum work. Its gracefully arching limbs have a tough job to support the large tapered pale pinkish-lavender flowers. 'Conestoga' grows about 10 ft. high and 12 ft. wide.

'Seminole' blooms profusely with lovely medium red-pink flowers and grows to only about 8 ft. I think the trade has yet

to realize how good this U.S. National Arboretum choice really is.

'Basham's Party Pink' is another hybrid of *L. indica* and *L. fauriei* and has the expected vigor and bark characteristics. This chance seedling was found in Texas and introduced by Lynn Lowery in 1965. Lots of lavender-pink flowers, large spreading habit, and questionable hardiness are qualities of this crape myrtle.

'Catawba' and 'Powhatan' are two more of the Indian-named choices made by the U.S. National Arboretum. Both are mildew resistant, with lavender flowers, ('Catawba' is a bit darker), and are relatively hardy. They grow to about 10 ft. and have excellent fall color. I think a combination of 'Catawba' and 'Conestoga' in a planting is a stunning sight.

'Byers Hardy Lavender' is an old crape myrtle and one of the best tree-form selections we have. Flowers appear later than most others, but continue to be effective until a hard frost ends the display.

'Muskogee', a U.S. National Arboretum selection is again a hybrid with *L. fauriei*. Light lavender flowers and the pretty bark are outstanding features. It is fast growing and highly mildew resistant.

Crape myrtles are easily propagated by either softwood or hardwood cuttings. Our primary effort is with wood taken after frost. The wood is sawed into 8-inch cuttings, graded, bunched, and stored over winter. The cuttings are planted into the open field in March, spaced 2 to 3 in. in the row with 2 in. above the ground. Surflan is applied following sticking. They are irrigated as needed all summer long. A 4-in. cutting of 'Natchez' will grow to 3 ft. in one summer on drip irrigation.

In July we cut them back to make them thicken. A U-shaped blade is run under the plants to check and harden them in October.

Defoliation, caused by the first hard frost, signals time for harvest. Some cultivars do not defoliate readily, which means that we must contend with the problem of drying leaves in storage. It would obviously be better if defoliation occured while the plants were still in the field.

We have worked closely with Dr. Charles Gilliam, Auburn University, in testing various chemicals that might defoliate the plants safely and effectively. The most satisfactory was an ethylene-type material. When applied 2 weeks before the first hard frost, it gave good results. However, the problem is how to predict the first frost accurately.

The procedure we find most consistently satisfactory is the old-fashioned technique of sweating off the leaves. We dig the plants after frost whether or not they have defoliated. Those that have not are piled in the warehouse and watered thoroughly several times. Heat builds up and the leaves drop. When the plants are pulled from the pile, any remaining leaves shake off easily. They are then processed in the usual way. We sell half a million crape myrtles per year, mostly as liners.

'Victor' and other dwarf cultivars do not produce enough long shoots to fit our hardwood program. Consequently these are rooted under mist in peat pots using very soft cuttings. Dilute solutions of IBA seem to aid and speed the rooting response. Cuttings are usually taken in July and in a few weeks are ready to move to the field.

Propagation by seed is not recommended because of the wide array of variations that result. There are enough choices, covering the entire range of shapes, sizes and colors readily available, to make this endeavor unproductive.

There are just too many variables for any one person to be an expert on crape myrtle, and my evaluations are, of course, subjective. Your own thoughts and experiences can add greatly to their usefulness. The *Lagerstroemia Handbook/Checklist*, in the reference list, is invaluable. It can be obtained from the author, Box 206, Swathmore, PA 19081.

REFERENCES

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