

Care of Crape Myrtles

Crape myrtles are a tradition in the Southern garden. Special care helps them to look their best in the landscape.

Picking the best varieties helps crape myrtles show their beauty all year long. Some varieties look good throughout the year. Certain varieties sport not only beautiful flowers in the spring; they also have good color in the fall as the leaves change and drop. When you add the fact that some varieties have beautiful exfoliating bark, you can see why it is important to select the best crape myrtle varieties.

Crape myrtles have few pests, but two may be showing up on your plants soon. One is powdery mildew. Powdery mildew is a fungus disease that appears as white powdery spots or as a white covering over the leaf surface. If the disease is bad, the leaf may become distorted. If the disease gets on the flowers, the mildew may seal the flowers closed and prevent the plant from flowering.

Powdery mildew grows mostly on the outside of the leaf. The fungus typically will do little damage to the plant. We can often ignore it. The biggest problem would be if the disease keeps the flowers from opening.

The best way to control powdery mildew is to plant resistant varieties. When buying crape myrtles, select from the long list of mildew resistant varieties. You can slow disease spread with fungicide sprays. Fungicides do not kill the disease but only keep it from spreading. For best control you must cover all leaf surfaces with spray. For continued control, you may have to spray repeatedly. This is not easy to do, so I do not suggest spraying in most situations. Powdery mildew can sometimes keep flowers from opening. A single spray before bloom may help to keep the mildew off of the flowers. Several fungicides including Immunox (myclobutanol) and FungAway (triadimefon) can help to slow the spread of this disease.

Aphids are a small soft, oval-bodied insect that feeds on crape myrtles. They reproduce quickly and can cover the young leaves and stems. Aphids exude a sticky substance called honeydew. This honeydew falls on the surface of leaves below and a black sooty fungus can grow on this honeydew. If it does, the leaf surface can be covered with this black growth. This fungus can also damage the plant by preventing sunlight from getting to the plant.

To get rid of the sooty mold, get rid of the aphids. Aphids reproduce quickly. Some can bear young without breeding. They can reproduce so quickly it is as though they are born pregnant. This means aphids can be hard to control.

Manage aphid populations with several tools. Do not spray unless the aphid population gets large. Insecticides not only kill aphids, they also kill the beneficial insects that feed on aphids. A single spray may reduce aphid populations while killing off the beneficial insects. Aphid populations may increase quickly with no natural enemies left on the plants.

If you spray, you may need to use several sprays of insecticides like Cyfluthrin, Bifenthrin or others. Insecticidal soap will also kill some aphids though probably not quite as well as the other insecticides. The advantage of insecticidal soap is that it may not kill as many beneficial insects. Using insecticidal soap may help the beneficial bugs to take care of your aphid problem.

Bayer Tree and Shrub Insect control (imidacloprid) should be used around the roots of plants. This chemical begins to work slowly but should give several months of control. When using pesticides, read and follow all directions on the label.