Topping trees, especially crape myrtles, is savage

By Bonnie Appleton
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CALL IT SHEAR ignorance. You'll see it reflected in Hampton Roads landscapes in the unwarranted and simply destructive practice of "crape murder." Strong words, but they're needed to help stop this abominable cutting, which ruins the natural beauty of the crape myrtle. Northern gardeners envy us our "tree of 100 days' bloom," a plant widely seen on Norfolk streets.

Crape murder is an example of topping - a practice that is often called improper pruning, although I don't think the words pruning and topping should ever even be used together.

By now everyone should be sick of hearing the many reasons not to top trees:

● It upsets the tree's food manufacturing capacity and reserve by severely altering the crown (shoot)-to-root ratio.

● It removes most of the buds that would form a "normal" branch system while stimulating undesirable, upright, largely unbranched watersprouts that actually accelerate a crape myrtle's growth rate.

● It leaves large branch stub wounds that are slow to callus or close, and are prone to decay.

● It creates hazards because weakly attached sprouts are more prone to break in wind and storms.

Two reasons are generally given for crape murder.

One is that dead flowers need to be cut off yearly to promote flowering. Wrong. Observe rarely pruned crape myrtles and you'll not see them lacking in flowers from year to year.

The other reason cited is that they'll get too big if they're not murdered (topped) yearly. I can't easily say no to that because trees may indeed get too big for their location if inappropriately sized cultivars were chosen to begin with. It's a matter of right plant - right location. There are dozens of crape myrtle cultivars of all sizes and shapes, so there's no excuse for selecting one whose height must be reduced each year.

Could it be that people just don't realize that "crape murder" is a form of topping? Even so, is crape topping really anything more than just a visual or aesthetic problem to which some of us object? Is it really something that should be stopped at all stages of crape myrtle growth?

Recently published research by Drs. Ed Gilman and Gary Knox of the University of Florida showed several reasons that topping should not be a standard practice for producing or maintaining crape myrtles. Those reasons included a sixfold increase in dead canopy stubs and

an increase in the need to clean dead wood out of topped trees .

Though it's great to try to prevent topping and crape murder on intact trees , what do we do with the millions of crape myrtles that have already been butchered?

Do we keep murdering them or can we do something to try to reverse some of the damage? We can and we should, although we can't restore them to their original natural branch patterns.

As topping-induced watersprouts begin to increase in stem size, selectively thin the sprouts out using properly located branch collar cuts. Where five or six sprouts exist, thin them to the two or three that are attached at the widest - and strongest - angle to the stem. New growth can be directed outward to expand and round out the crown by encouraging not just vertical, but also horizontal, growth.

You may need to repeat this process for a few years in a row, and the scars, both physical and visual, will never completely disappear before a trained eye. But as a result of some selective pruning, you'll have more sustainable or low-maintenance plants needing very little future pruning.

Remember that pruning, whether with proper or improper cuts, is a form of wounding. Since wounding causes crape myrtles to mobilize reserves to wall off wounds and produce new tissue we should minimize pruning - and prune only when it will result in the most healthy type of growth.

As well-trained arborists often say - **"A properly pruned tree (crape myrtle) doesn't look pruned; a murdered (topped) crape myrtle does."**

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