The Annual Article on Pruning Crape Myrtles

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well there are eight pictures of crape myrtles that tell this story better than I can with 8,000 words. So I'll keep it short.

You have probably noticed crape myrtles that are topped at waist height, give or take a few feet. Topping is never recommended for any tree – at least not recommended by professionals. The pictures that tell this story were taken by the Urban Forestry Staff of the City of Charlotte beginning in 2001.

In March 2001 one crape myrtle was topped at about 8-10 feet. Another next to it was left alone. By late April the un-pruned tree is in full leaf. The tree that was topped has some tufts of leaves at the end of the stems.

By the end of July, the un-pruned tree is in full bloom. The tree that was topped is pushing out a few blooms. In the next year the topped tree achieved something close to full bloom. But beside the tree that was left alone, it is a pale image of what it could have been.

OK, less than 200 words. You can see the pictures for yourself online at http://www.ncufc.org/TheTreeToppingStory-picsspeaklouder.pdf Or call your Extension Office to request a print out.

Meanwhile, the general guidelines for pruning crape myrtles would include selectively shaping the tree in its early growing years. Then stand back and let it grow. If you want the tree to be smaller, see a Collegial Congress of Crapes in Green Thumb Prints, August 2009 at http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/19/GTP2009_Summer_web.pdf
Top 12 PERENNIAL PLANTS
THE CLASSIC CITY AWARDS

The December 2009 issue of Greenhouse Grower Magazine included an article by Dr. Allan Armitage, professor in the Department of Horticulture, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. Armitage is well recognized among horticulture professionals for his study and evaluation of perennial plants. Year after year he has evaluated perennial plants in his research trials in Georgia. In addition to the professional eyeballs of Armitage and his staff, visitors were asked which plants they liked best. Evaluation criteria included length of flowering (or other ornamental aspects), disease/insect problems, and performance under adverse conditions.

In the article published late last year he presented his top 12 perennials that “exemplified the highest performance for the longest period of time in our challenging environment in Athens, Georgia.” These are plants Armitage calls the best of the best.

How well does performance in Athens compare with performance in Chatham County NC? Athens is in USDA plant hardiness zone 7b; Chatham is in 7a. Our winters are slightly more severe. That’s about as much as we can infer from that map. (See Plant Hardiness, Green Thumb Prints, Fall 2007, [http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/19/GTPFall2007.pdf](http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/19/GTPFall2007.pdf)

There is nothing automatic about any of these selections. They are good plants but only if planted in the right place and planted well. The list is available with pictures online at [http://polk.ces.ncsu.edu/content/Best+Perennial+Flowers](http://polk.ces.ncsu.edu/content/Best+Perennial+Flowers)

Here are the 12 “best of the best.”

**Athyrium nipponica ‘Wildwood Twist’** – a selection of Japanese painted fern

**Coreopsis ‘Route 66’** – with red and yellow “daisy” flowers

**Echinacea ‘Tiki Torch’** – an orange cone-flower

**Erysimum ‘Jenny Brook’** – a wall flower with about five months of flowers

**Gaillardia ‘Georgia Yellow’** – yellow blanket of flowers from late spring to early fall

**Heliopsis ‘Tuscan Sun’** – a dwarf heliopsis

**Heuchera villosa ‘Brownies’** – a coral bells for autumn

**Heuchera villosa ‘Caramel’** – “apricot-hued” leaves

**Phlox ‘Peacock White’** – robust, compact with bright white flowers

**Lavandula x intermedia ‘Dutch’** – a vigorous hardy lavender

**Rosa ‘Sunny Knockout’** – a fragrant pale yellow rose

**Rudbeckia ‘Henry Eiler’** – rudbeckia with whimsy

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Things I Wish You Knew

This is about questions I get frequently or ideas that solve more than one problem. Chances are good that with this article I’m “preaching to the choir.” Most readers of Green Thumb Prints have heard some of this before. And it may not reach the people who will call or email with the same questions again this year. But perhaps you will have opportunity to share it with someone who would never call me. And chances are that there’s at least one thing here that will give you a new perspective.

**There are very few plant problems that are worth your concern during the winter.** Winter is a time for humans to stay close to the stove and a pot of warm. Insects also tend to hunker down. Disease pathogens will not thrive until conditions are more favorable. Damage that you might observe on leaves during the winter or early spring was probably done months ago and is not likely to get worse. In some cases, it may get worse when new growth starts in the spring. So I encourage everyone to pay attention to the spring growth. See if there are dead stems that don’t leaf out. Are the new leaves free of injury? There are a couple of things that might be worth looking for now: scale insects are easier to see on bare stems and cool weather spider mites may be busy on needle evergreens or Japanese hollies. But for most deformations or discolorations on leaves, you can skip the worry.

**Fruit rots may be preventable but are not curable.** Routinely in the summer we’ll observe black, white, or bitter rot on apples and brown rot of peaches. When these diseases are present the infection generally occurs many weeks before you can see evidence of it. It may occur before, during, or soon after bloom. We do not have remedial products that can cure these rot diseases. If you don’t prevent the infection, they are just some of the reasons we lose fruit. Among the standard measures to prevent them is removal of primary sources of infection: dead wood, cankers, and dried fruit “mummies.” That requires careful inspection during winter pruning. And remember that pruning is also a major disease control strategy. Thin the canopy to improve air movement and light penetration. When the tree is fully leaved-out in the summer, you should still see some sunlight reaching the ground beneath the tree. Finally, if you intend to use preventive sprays, the
Things I Wish You Knew 
(continued from page 2)

other fruits. For disease management, focus on prevention; because we can’t cure it.

Fruit “mummies” and dead twigs often harbor disease pathogens

There is no such thing as chemical-free, but you shouldn’t need a lot of products anyway. Note the paragraph above on preventing fruit rots; prevention is primarily strategy not product. Good strategy for managing diseases and insects begins with good plant management strategy. A plant suited for the geographic area, a location suitable for the plant, good soil preparation, careful planting, attentive water management during establishment, pruning to enhance, and monitoring for early detection of problems. Even when a problem develops, best management may not be a product, organic or not. Some problems are caused by physical injury. Some problems can be solved with a pair of pruners quicker than you can figure out a treatment. Sometimes products can buy you time but seldom solve the problem. Usually, the best approach is not to use a product but to be a good gardener—a little harder but more satisfying.

Fertilizer is neither food nor medicine. I recently ran across this email correspondence:

Comment: I have a camellia, whose leaves are progressively turning brown and leaves are dying. I have been fertilizing it regularly and have given it plenty of water.

Response: My first thought is to stop fertilizing and watering.

Fertilizer provides raw materials. Fertilizing a plant that has a problem may be like sending steel, aluminum, and plastic to Toyota recently; it may just make the problem worse. Plants make their own foods, and fertilizers provide the raw materials. They need a supply of raw materials to coincide with their abilities to use them. If the plant has a problem it probably can’t use raw materials efficiently. Whether the problem is caused by insect, disease, attack by weed trimmer, competition from weeds, or too much water, a better strategy is to figure out what the problem is. In the case above one or more of several things might have caused the symptoms: too much fertilizer, too much water, not enough water, root rot, and probably others. Fertilizer is probably not a good idea.

Growing fruit trees is not the same as growing fruit. There seems a basic assumption that if I plant fruit trees, then it follows that I will have fruit. It ain’t necessarily so. Especially if the fruit tree planted is one not likely to thrive here such as mango or cherry. I routinely encounter gardeners who select a fruit variety not likely to thrive in our climate, put it in a location better suited for growing fungal pathogens than fruits, do little or no soil preparation, plant at the wrong time, do little or no pruning, and allow grass or weeds to get all the water. If you’re willing to take what you get, that’s fine. If you really want to grow fruit, it takes commitment, energy, and time from the gardener.

Control weeds earlier rather than later. Annual weeds that will be a major problem in the spring are in your neighbor’s lawns and gardens right now. They are not too hard to find and may not look too bad yet. They are mainly growing roots. When the weather warms this spring, they will quickly form inconspicuous flowers followed by even less obvious seeds. Then having passed their genes into the next generation, they will die. When your neighbor asks what to do, you can point out that there’s not much reason to spray a weed that’s at the end of its life anyway. He or she might find it useful to remove and collect seed heads before they disperse. But that always seems to lack glamour and is frankly laborious. Maybe next year?

Prune out the dead stuff. The first rule of pruning is to get rid of the dead stuff. It will not grow. It’s curious that plants that would appear to be where they are for ornamental purposes can have clearly non-ornamental sections that are clearly brown and dead. And they retain their non-ornamental character for months or years. What are we thinking? Please help all your friends and relations understand how to distinguish dead from living plant parts. Dead is really forever unless it gets into the compost pile. Tell them to prune it.

Most plants have a disease and it’s not the end. Don’t most people you know have some ailment? Most plants do too. That doesn’t mean you need a lot of drugs and hospitalization. In most cases the best strategy is a little TLC. Prune out dead stems. Get rid of competing grass or weeds in the plant’s root zone. Get some fingers in the soil to check moisture levels. Take a soil sample. Leaf spot diseases can be fatal; or they can be about as serious as a hangnail.

Squashes have a lot of pests. I quit growing squash decades ago, and all it took was the frustration of squash bugs. Since then I’ve learned about squash vine borers and powdery mildew, either of which can reduce or eliminate any productivity. Some people like squash more than I. So if you’re going to grow one or several varieties, I would suggest scattering plants around the garden rather than planting them all together—make it a little harder for the insects. Be sure to give them plenty

(Continued on page 4)
Things I Wish You Knew

(continued from page 2)

of room for air movement – making it harder for the mildew to thrive. And keep records of where you grow them every year so you can put them somewhere else next year.

Lace bugs are a common problem of azaleas and don’t have to be hard to manage. They also affect rhododendron, pyracantha, and a few other things. When they are feeding on the lower side of the leaves, the leaf tops turn a pale whitish to bronze color and look washed out. For major infestations, pruning the most severely affected foliage can remove a lot of breeding adults. For the rest you can spray the lower side of the leaves with an insecticidal soap – about as safe as insecticides get. Repeat the application in two weeks. Then monitor the plants about once a month. Repeat treatment if lacebugs are found before the plant gets in trouble again.

Most plant problems are predictable. And if you can predict them, why not watch for them instead of waiting for it to be a major problem. If you know azaleas or Japanese hollies are prone to root rot, be sure to do a thorough job of soil preparation (a bed, not a hole) prior to planting. Standard garden references often list the most common problems on any plant with any history of cultivation. You don’t have to wait till the plant is dead to have an idea of what’s going wrong.

If there’s enough of some landscape plant that you notice it while driving around, it may not be a good idea to plant one yourself. Sometimes a plant such as red tip, Bradford pear, or Leyland cypress is discovered to have great garden characteristics and is also easy to grow in a nursery. When that happens, many of those plants start to show up everywhere. Sometimes it’s only many years later when the plant’s flaws become so obvious that you can spot them through the windshield. Sometimes a plant with no significant pest problems is planted so widely that minor pests have opportunity to thrive and become serious major pests. The red tip was planted so extensively that a leaf spot disfigured it and resulted in a really beautiful plant looking really ugly. We’ve found the branch structure of Bradfords so weak that they break apart in a storm. And Leyland cypresses have at least two lists of major issues now.

Most tomato plants get early blight. And they can still make tomatoes all season. Early blight survives the winter in the soil. Plant your tomatoes somewhere else every year on a 3-4 year rotation. During rainfall or irrigation the fungus may splash up on the lower leaves. Stake the plants and mulch to reduce the splashing. Infected leaves reveal small brown to black spots on the lower leaves. Spots may be surrounded by a yellow halo. Spots may expand in a non-symmetrical but concentric pattern. As rainfall or irrigation moves through the plant the pathogen may be splashed onto other leaves. Remove leaves as they become infested. Space and stake plants to allow air to move around them making life tougher for the fungus. Keep weeds down, keep plants vigorous, remove lower foliage as it turns yellow, and keep picking tomatoes.

There are no rules for pruning fruit trees that haven’t been pruned. The most important time to prune fruit trees is in the first 4-5 years. They don’t grow good shapes on their own. And from the tree’s perspective, it doesn’t matter if the fruit rots. The fruit is just the plant’s way of protecting the seeds. If you want fruit, start early to select branches that are well spaced and not shading each other. And remove those that are too close or competing. If you don’t create a good shape in the tree’s early years, it will not do it for you. And you can never recover those early years. If your tree has not been pruned annually, there’s probably no good set of directions on what to do now.

No matter how pretty it looks in the catalog, it may never be a good plant for you. The catalogs are good at showing pictures of produce growing in Oregon, Missouri, or Texas. But in order for the plant to produce that pea pod or berry, the plant must actually survive and even thrive. So more important than pretty pictures is whether the plant is well adapted to the climate in your gardens. Extension offers a number of publications suggesting varieties with a local track record. They provide a good place to start. After that the pretty pictures are good for you to experiment with.

Aphids are easy. Aphids (AKA plant lice) are small insects that feed only on tender young growth of plants. They come in all colors and are most often found on the newest, youngest (tenderest) growth on the plant. As their numbers grow, you may find dozens of them clustered on the young stems or new leaves. A blast with a water hose will dislodge, drown, or maim most of them. Those that survive seldom find their way back to the plant. Since the vegetation is tender, you can also use an insecticidal soap. It doesn’t take a cannon, the soap will do it if you use it appropriately.
Things I Wish You Knew

(continued from page 4)

**Don’t fertilize just because the ads said you should.** During spring and fall, fertilizers companies seize an opportunity to sell fertilizer. That’s their job, and they do it well. If you pay attention to the ads, you’ll often find they don’t ask what kind of grass you have or whether you need those shrubs to grow another three feet this year. They’re just selling fertilizer. Your job is to determine when or if your plants need fertilizing, develop a schedule consistent with your goals, and stick to it. Fertilizer applied at the wrong time can make problems worse. Extension publications can help you in achieving your goals and minimizing problems.

**All plants need the same nutrients (aka fertilizer).** Regardless of what the fertilizer package says, peaches, pansies, petunias, pines, pumpkins, and poinsettias all need the same nutrients. The question gardeners need to ask is which of those nutrients the soil can supply and which need to be supplemented. In some cases the soil can retain sufficient amounts for years. At least one of the essential nutrients may need supplementing on a scheduled basis—and that does vary with the plant. Pumpkins and pines need the same things but at different times and different amounts. A fertilizer called “food” may be a good marketing device to harvest more dollars from the consumer.

There is a good computer based program to help you determine how often to water your lawn. I never thought I would say that. But technology catches up with us. The Turf Irrigation Management System (TIMS) is available online at [http://www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/TIMS/](http://www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/TIMS/). Once you enter some information about your lawn and how you apply water, it will start a checkbook system of rainfall and evaporation that accounts for temperature, humidity, wind, cloud cover, and even “spotty” summer showers with about a 5 mile sensitivity. If the lawn is important, the system can help you keep it healthy and use water efficiently at the same time.

**Squash have separate male and female flowers on the same plant.** And the male flowers will not make squash. But the male flowers are important. They provide pollen that enables the female flowers to set fruit. The sex act for squashes (and cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and gourds) requires an intermediary to transfer the pollen from male flower to female flower. You can be the pimp yourself but insects (mainly bees) do it more efficiently. To attract insects the plant first grows only male flowers. After a week or two, it will start producing some female flowers. If insects have been attracted, then as they move from flower to flower the sex act is completed and the ovary (obvious on the female flowers) becomes a fruit and grows till you pick it. Those early male flowers fall off without setting fruit. If the female ovaries fall off, look around to see if you have bees visiting the flowers.

**Native ants are the best natural defense against fire ants.** At least one study has shown that as many as 90% of mated fire ant queens never get a mound established because they are attacked by native ants defending their territory. Most ants are seldom a problem for gardeners, a nuisance at worst. Broad area treatments for fire ants also impact native ants. If you clean up the whole yard and have no ants left, the next ant you can expect to see is a fire ant. In most cases fire ants should be addressed only on a mound by mound basis. Wide area broadcast treatments can be justified if there are no native ants present. Areas where there are 20 mounds per acre or areas that have been bulldozed may not have any native ants left.

**Timing is everything.** We plant at optimal times. We prune at optimal times. We fertilize when roots are growing and can use fertilizer. We think about plant diseases when the climate is suitable for them. We treat insects when they show up, not before. There are exceptions to any of these examples. But there is an optimal time for any gardening activity. Other times may be a waste of energy and resources.
In a “normal” winter in central N.C. you might be planting a vegetable garden soon or already have some things in the ground. Back last fall we heard predictions that our winter would be cold and wet. Most of us will agree that the prediction was not far off. That may impact your planting schedule.

For most of us it’s been “too wet to plow.” And it may continue to be for a while. With the soil as wet as it is, introducing machinery or even foot prints can cause soil compaction that may not be relieved for years. Avoid compacting soil at every opportunity. And disturbing wet soil can create large “clods” that can dry to the consistency of rock. That also may not change for years. Determining when it’s dry enough comes from experience. And experience comes from making bad decisions. I don’t know of a handy measuring tool that you can use. Perhaps the soil should feel comfortably workable when you handle it in your hands.

Sometimes I advise gardeners to clean up their gardens in late summer or fall and begin preparing for the next season. Even if you’re not going to plant for several months, if the soil is prepared then you can take advantage of brief opportunities to get in and plant when you couldn’t actually prepare the soil.

So with all those ifs and buts, late winter is usually a good time in our area to plant vegetables such as cabbage, carrots, onions, peas, potatoes, radish, and spinach followed soon by beets, broccoli, kale, lettuce, mustard, and Swiss chard. Most of these plants will tolerate a mild freeze depending on how cold it gets, how long it stays cold, and how well developed the plant is. On the coldest nights the plants can be protected with fabric or a light application of straw mulch over the top. And people can be very innovative in creating protective covers.

If you need a good guide to when you can plant vegetables in our area, there is a good Quick Reference Guide available on line at http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/pdf/hil-8103.pdf I also have a group of web pages with month-by-month reminders of garden activities you might want to remember at http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/homehort/HomeCal.html

Most of the plants you can plant in winter will grow more rapidly or more slowly as the weather warms and cools. In most years you can start picking things like spinach and peas in April. But if you don’t plant them till April, and if it turns hot in May (which it will) those plants will finish their careers in your vegetable garden quicker than you can say “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.”

You do need to pay attention to the weather. And there’s always a certain amount of risk associated with gardening. There’s also a lot of reward. You can feel the pride of putting food on the table that you grew yourself. Heck, you can eat it right in the garden. It does not get any fresher or any more local than that.

Another reward gardeners are enjoying is the sharing of what they grow. And in North Carolina generally and Chatham County specifically, there is a great need for more food. North Carolina recently ranked Second Worst in the nation for food insecurity among children under five years of age. 24% of children under 5 in North Carolina lack regular access to good nutritious food.

In Chatham County more than 30% of children live in poverty. 45% of Chatham’s children qualify to receive school lunches free or at reduced cost. Summer can be a particularly tough time for these children who may not have access to the same food resources when school is out.

We can be proud that Chatham County’s gardeners are pitching in. Last summer we made an appeal via email for gardeners to donate excess produce to any of several local food pantries. In the eleven days from that first simple request through the end of that month, CORA food pantry in Pittsboro received more than 100 pounds of fresh produce that they could attribute to that request.

There is much to be done. Food pantries statewide have reported significant increases in requests for food. Children account for about 45% of the needs served by CORA food pantry. This year we’re asking you not just to donate surplus but to plant a little extra. Gardeners can grow food. In 1995 the national Garden Writers Association initiated the Plant-A-Row for the Hungry campaign. Since that time over 14 million pounds of produce have been donated by America’s gardeners. As a gardener you can be part of that movement to help children who need food at critical times in their development.

You can make a difference. And together we are making a difference. This year plant a little extra. It will make you feel good.
Those #^*)%d! Fire Ants

We may get a chance soon to see how a cold wet winter impacts fire ants. I’m not expecting miracles. Young colonies that were small or weak going into winter may not have survived. Older larger colonies usually extend several feet deep. There the soil moderates temperatures. And the nature of the nest is already designed to facilitate drainage. In all likelihood, with warmer days you’ll have a chance to see a slight change in color to the mounds as they perform the ritual of spring cleaning.

In Chatham County North Carolina we are probably just as intelligent as the folks in Chatham County Georgia or in Mobile, Alabama. They have figured out that they aren’t eliminating fire ants. Most such efforts are a waste of time except for those who need an opportunity to display testosterone.

However, you can deal with individual fire ant mounds. And you can probably eliminate specific mounds on a mound by mound basis. Concentrate on those mounds where people, pets, or livestock are likely to come in contact with them. Ignore the others.

We can actually make the argument that fire ants are beneficial. They feed largely on insects. I don’t expect you to feel much better about them. But if fire ants are your nemesis, the rest of the ants out there are your friends. Native ants are your best natural defense against fire ants.

When a fire ant queen leaves the mound in the spring to mate, she accomplishes that feat on the wing. After mating, she lands somewhere depending on how the wind blows. She will attempt to select areas with disturbed soil such as a clear-cut or a new landscape. Sometimes those areas have been so thoroughly disturbed that there are no native ants left.

But as the queen attempts to begin a new nest, native ants in the area, if present, will defend their territory (and food resources) by attacking that queen. In one study as many as 90% of mated queens failed to establish a nest because they were killed by native ants. Black ants, red ants, big or little, they can help you in your fight against fire ants.

Your next best strategy (and strategy is more important than product selection) is to use fire ant baits while the ants are actively foraging – usually in spring and fall. Baits include a minuscule amount of an insecticide. Some are organic, some are not. Some include the same active ingredient you put on your pets for flea and tick control. If the ants are actively foraging and find the bait, they take it back into the mound and share it with all their kin. Depending on the product, the colony slowly dies off.

To determine if the ants are actively foraging, drop a potato chip (the oily kind) near (not on) the mound. Check back in about 30 minutes to an hour. If the ants are foraging you’ll see them on the chip. That’s a good time to substitute your bait product. If the ants are not on the chip, you can save your effort. Either the mound is no longer occupied, or the ants are not out foraging. Best time for this activity is an afternoon, spring or fall, when the temperature is in the 65-80 range.

And everything needs to be dry. Moisture results in product deterioration. Avoid using baits on damp or rainy days or when there is dew on the ground. Use fresh bait and keep it dry in an air tight container.

And be patient. You may not eliminate all the mounds. But you can deal with those you need to. Just give them the bait and wait for them to die. It may take a few weeks. And watch for new mounds in the fall. They will show up, and you can deal with them. It’s just as effective to bait them and let them die as it is to kick the mound.

Quick Facts for Fire Ant Mounds

We don’t expect to eliminate fire ants. Select mounds where direct contact by persons, pets, or livestock is likely.

To eliminate a mound you must eliminate the queen who lives inside the mound.

When the mound is disturbed, the queen is removed via underground tunnels within seconds.

Use an oily food such as a potato chip on a warm dry afternoon to determine if fire ants are actively foraging. Place the chip near, not on, the mound.

If ants feed on the chip within an hour, it’s a good time to use a bait product.

Select a bait that includes on the label the site where you need to treat.

Apply the bait according to label instructions near, not on, the mound.

Allow several weeks for the ants to distribute the bait within the mound and for all the ants to die off.
Taking the Fire out of Fire Ants

What: Cooperative Extension in Chatham County will offer a program on fire ant management. Extension Agents Sam Groce and Al Cooke will repeat their popular program on fire ant management. The program is appropriate for all areas that may have fire ant problems including home gardens and landscapes, pasture and forage areas, and fruit and vegetable production. For licensed or certified pesticide applicators 2 Hours of pesticide recertification credit is anticipated in categories G, H, I, K, L, N, O, D, X.

Where: Auditorium, lower level of Agriculture Building, 45 South Street, Pittsboro, NC
(See Map of Main County Office Complex at http://www.chathamnc.org/Index.aspx?page=796)

When: April 29, 2010—7:00 to 9:00 p.m.

How: The program is appropriate for both professionals and non-professionals. A $5 fee will cover light refreshments and educational materials. Seating may be limited. Participants are required to call 919.542.8202 to pre-register no later than April 26.