Extension Gardener

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Empowering gardeners. Providing garden solutions.

in this issue

Crape myrtle pruning

Crape myrtles should be purchased based on the mature size and form needed for the landscape site. Varieties of crape myrtle ranging from less than 2 feet to greater than 40 feet high are available. All varieties can be grouped into one of three categories based on how they were pruned at the nursery: shrubs, multi-stem trees, and single stem trees. Cultivars that grow less than 10 feet tall are often grown as multi-stemmed shrubs with multiple branches all the way to the ground. Taller growing cultivars with either single or multiple main stems are usually limbed-up to create small to medium trees. Future pruning should follow the training begun at the nursery.

Crape myrtles trained as small trees are often improperly pruned, using a method known as topping. Topping involves removing a major portion of a limb. This leaves behind a stub that is slow to heal and may result in decay. Topping results in numerous weak sprouts that bend under the weight of flowers and often break when blown or weighed down by rain, snow, or ice.

Crape myrtles are often topped because they have grown too large for their location. Know the mature size of the crape myrtle you are purchasing and place it in an appropriate location. That way it can grow freely without the added work of pruning. When planting near a structure, place large growing varieties 15 to 20 feet from a wall.

Another reason often cited for topping is to maintain a view. But when topped, the flush of a low, bushy-growth tree inhibits the view even more than an untopped tree does. You can create views through or under a crape myrtle by removing lower limbs and thinning to enhance its form as a small, open tree.

Because they flower on new growth, crape myrtles are pruned in winter. Winter pruning does not have to be heavy. If needed, small shrub-form crape myrtles can be pruned to keep them compact and tidy. Larger growing tree-form varieties should be pruned to remove suckers, dead branches, and crossing branches. Cutting out low hanging branches enhances the trunk's beauty.

The trunks of a properly pruned tree form crape myrtle (variety 'Natchez'). ©*Charlotte Glen*

Summer pruning of a crape myrtle should take place after flowering and be limited to removing suckers at the base of the trunk and possibly removing faded blooms on small plants. Removing faded blooms reduces the weight on the ends of branches. This can result in another set of flowers and help prevent breakage of limbs.

Be careful whom you take advice or direction from when pruning. Don't follow a practice you see someone else doing unless you know the reason they are doing it.

— Danny Lauderdale

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Extension Showcase

Community Gardening

Starting a community garden is a wonderful way to bring a community together around a shared interest in growing food. To be successful, the community needs to be involved in the process of starting the garden. The more involved participants are in the development of the garden, the greater the chances for overall success.

The first step in starting a community garden it to unite a group of interested individuals, who together develop a mission that addresses the core goals and values of the garden. Next create a list of tasks and divide the workload to make the project easier to conquer. Identify a site—preferably one in close proximity to where plot owners live or work. Then get access to water and tools, as well as fencing to exclude wildlife.

Gain group consensus when addressing the garden's organization and plot owner guidelines. Will this be an allotment or communal style community garden? Once these elements have been decided, the community will need to raise money for the project and raise awareness in the larger community. The more stakeholders there are, the more successful the community garden will be.

To learn more, or to find a community garden in your county, visit this site: http://nccommunitygarden.ncsu.edu/

— Michelle Wallace

Smart Gardening — *Winterizing houseplants*

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As temperatures cool and frost approaches, it is time to bring houseplants indoors for winter. Most houseplants are of tropical origin and can suffer damage at temperatures well above freezing. Many houseplants can sustain damage at temperatures below 45°F, while some can be damaged when temperatures fall below 50°F. This is a good rule to follow: Whenever nighttime temperatures begin to fall below 50°F, it is time to bring your houseplants indoors.

Most houseplants perform best if they are allowed to gradually acclimate to their new indoor environment. Otherwise they are likely to lose lots of leaves within a few days of being moved indoors. While this is usually not life threatening, it does set the plants back by a few weeks. Avoid excessive leaf loss by making the change less traumatic. If outdoor plants have been in a high light environment, place them in a similar environment indoors: near south-facing windows or under plant lights on a timer. Be sure to clean windows to allow maximum light penetration.

Prior to bringing plants indoors, inspect leaves and stems for insects and diseases and treat appropriately. Soaking the pots in lukewarm water for about 15 minutes can force some insects out of the soil. This is also a good time to repot, if necessary. To determine what size container is needed, measure the height of the plant and divide by two. This should be the diameter of the pot used for the plant.

To keep plants healthy during winter, do not overwater. Allow the surface of the potting soil to become dry to the touch between waterings. Most houseplants require very little to no fertilizer over winter because this is a time of reduced growth. Giving plants just the bare essentials over winter is the best approach.

— Randy Fulk

Food Production — *Fruit tree cultivar selection*

Selecting the correct fruit tree cultivar is very important. The wrong cultivar could take 10 years to bear fruit, 10 more years to prove it won't work, and 10 years for a replacement to begin fruiting. I don't know about you, but I don't have too many 30-year blocks of time left to waste.

Many apple cultivars will grow in the NC piedmont. Avoid low chill varieties and don't let disease resistance drive your decision. In particular, apple scab and powdery mildew are not major problems here. 'Gala', 'Jon-a-Gold', and 'Gold Rush' are good selections. 'Fuji' has good taste even if it doesn't color most years. 'Stayman Winesap' has a tendency to split when grown below 1,000 feet elevation, but the other winesaps will do fine.

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With European pears, choose fire blight resistant cultivars. 'Moonglow' and 'Maxine' are two good choices and will cross-pollinate. There is no fire blight resistance in Oriental pears,but 'Hosui', 'Kosui', 'Olympic', or 'Shin Li' are recommended choices. 'Methly' is a good plum.

'Montmorency' is the sour cherry of choice. Don't plant a sweet cherry that requires cross-pollination, even if you plant two trees. Sweet cherries are not reliable, and if one dies, the other one will stop yielding. 'Stella' has been proven, but newer varieties such as 'Black Gold' might do as well.

Although figs are semitropical, 'Celeste' does a good job in the NC piedmont. 'Brown Turkey' is another option with slightly less cold tolerance. Peach cultivars 'Contender' and 'China Pearl' have uncommonly good taste, plus some cold tolerance during bloom, which puts them ahead of other tasty cultivars.

Most any American persimmon will work, but Oriental persimmons are prone to winter injury. If you want to try them, look for the varieties 'Giant Fuyu', 'Fuyu', 'Jiro', or 'Hanagosho'.

— David Goforth

Pest Alert — *Dormant oils for piercing and sucking insects*

Dormant oils have been used as sprays on fruit trees and other woody plants for centuries to kill overwintering mites and insects such as scales and aphids. These oils were typically very thick and contained sulfonated residues that could harm green plant material. Now we have highly refined oils, called horticultural, summer, or superior oils, that contain little residues and can be applied safely throughout the growing season if certain precautions are followed.

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The main reasons we use horticultural oils are that they are harmless to humans and pets, they are effective at killing pests, and they evaporate soon after application so there are no toxic residual effects. This means that the oil must cover target insects to make an impact. Identifying your pest and where it resides on the plant is important so you can direct the oil for coverage.

Horticultural oils affect pests in different ways. For some insects, the oils block breathing tubes, which causes asphyxiation. Metabolism may be interrupted by the oils, or they may affect the pest's ability to feed. In all cases, the oil must be applied at the proper stage of pest development, which is generally when pests are in active juvenile or adult stages of life.

These oils can be safely used on trees, woody ornamentals, and even some vegetables and flowers, for the control of mites, aphids, scale, and whiteflies. Certain oils even help control powdery mildew and sooty mold. Read the label carefully and avoid plants that are sensitive to oils. Don't apply horticultural oils when temperatures are above 100°F, or below freezing, and don't combine oils with pesticides containing sulfur, such as Captan.

— Jeana Myers

Carolina Lawns — *Selecting seeds for spring planting of lawns*

As the days get warmer and we examine the spring lawn, we may notice thin, bare areas we want to improve. You may excitedly decide, "This year, I am going to fix this lawn up!" Not every type of lawn, however, can be seeded in spring.

To renovate cool-season turf such as fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, spring does not offer sufficient time for grass roots to establish well enough to survive the long, hot, dry spells of summer. Your reseeding investment will go further by renovating cool-season turf from late summer to early fall so that roots can establish over the winter.

Late spring to early summer is the best time to reseed warm-season turf such as common bermudagrass, bahiagrass, centipede, and zoysiagrass. To choose the right bag of grass seed for your lawn, first figure out which cultivar you want based on desired characteristics such as texture, color, cold tolerance, and intended use. See NC State University publication *Carolina Lawns: A Guide to Maintaining Quality Turf in the Landscape* (AG-69), or visit www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/PDFFiles/004175/ag69.pdf to download a copy, which includes a comparison of cultivar performances for warm-season grasses that do well in North Carolina.

Next, check the percentage of weed seeds contained within the bag. Get as close to zero percent as possible. No need to make future weed control any more pronounced than necessary! Finally, check the label for a germination rate of 85 percent or better. One way to know you are buying quality seed is to purchase certified seeds. A blue certified tag indicates the seeds have met certain standards of the NC Crop Improvement Association to assure high quality and low levels of contaminants.

— Aimee Rankin

Tips & Tasks

Tools

- After the growing season ends, many gardeners forget about their tools and neglect them during the winter months. If you are this type of gardener, make it your mission to clean tools after every use. Do not place dirty tools back in your shed. This can cause them to rust and waste your hard-earned money.

Pruning

- Pruning is often done during the dormant winter months and more specifically in January and February. Fruit trees, grapes, and berries are best pruned during these months. As always you can remove the three D's (dead, diseased, or damaged) anytime of the year.

Sanitation

- Practice garden sanitation. If you did not remove plant debris at the end of the garden season, be sure to do so before you plant. Leaving crop debris can increase pest and disease problems.

Lawns

- When fertilizing cool-season lawns, apply 1 lb of nitrogen per 1,000 sq ft in February, or follow soil test recommendations.

— Danelle Cutting

Extension Gardener

Around the State

Showstopper — *Chinese pistache*

Tough as nails, drought tolerant, and pest free are all terms used to describe Chinese pistache, *Pistacia chinensis*. This beautiful medium-sized tree is perfect for home landscapes and urban environments in USDA hardiness zones 6 to 9. Though awkward and somewhat unruly when young, Chinese pistache develops into an outstanding specimen tree with an umbrella shaped crown.

At maturity, this tree reaches a height of 40 feet and a spread of 25 to 35 feet. Chinese pistache has finely divided, lustrous green foliage during the summer months and terrific fiery orange and red fall color. This plant will flourish in nearly every soil type as long as it is well drained and does best in full sun. Transplant one into your landscape—you'll be glad you did.

— John Vining

Helping You Grow

Extension Master Gardener Volunteers

The NC Extension Master Gardener Volunteer (EMGV) program disseminates horticultural knowledge to the residents of each county by training volunteers to extend the reach of the local Extension staff. To become an EMGV, you must first complete a 12- to 16-week training course. Most counties offer training in the late winter or spring. Once initial training is complete, participants must complete a 40-hour internship that could include answering gardening questions, serving as a school garden mentor, being part of a speakers' bureau, leading garden tours, and much more. To find out more, visit www.ncstategardening.org or contact your local Extension center.

— Kerrie Roach

Edibles — *Sprouts*

It is easy to grow nutritious sprouts indoors anytime of year. All you need is a clear canning jar, a jar ring, a soft piece of nylon screen to cover the jar's mouth, tap water, and sprouting seeds. Sprouting seeds lack the coating of pesticide found on some garden seed and can be purchased online or at food stores. To start a batch of sprouts, measure out two to four tablespoons of seeds such as lentils or alfalfa in a quart size jar. Add a cup of clean tap water. Let the seeds soak a couple of hours, then drain. Store the jar on its side in a cabinet. Once a day, open the lid to rinse and drain the seeds. After the seeds sprout, repeat the daily rinsing and draining but store the jar in indirect sunlight. As the sprouts turn green, transfer them to a storage container kept in the refrigerator for use within three to five days.

— Thomas Campbell

Sustainability — *Vermicomposting*

Vermicomposting turns kitchen waste into a nutritious soil for plants. When mixed with soil, vermicompost enhances its structure, drainage, and moisture-holding capacity. Vermicompost is also teeming with beneficial microorganisms and enzymes, and contains plant growth hormones and humic acids that can increase rates of germination, growth, flowering, and fruiting in crops, usually independent of nutrient availability. In addition, vermicompost can decrease attacks by plant pathogens, parasitic nematodes, and arthropod pests.

The materials for starting a vermicomposting system are simple. All you need are a worm bin, bedding, water, composting earthworms, and food scraps. Either buy a manufactured worm bin or make your own out of wooden or a plastic storage container. Drill holes in the upper sides of the bin for air flow and in the bottom for drainage; do not drill holes in the lid. Place your worm bin indoors or outside, but try to keep the temperature above 55°F and below 85°F. Fill the bin half way with moist, fluffy bedding such as shredded paper, brown leaves, or coconut coir. Add at least one pound of *Eisenia fetida* earthworms, commonly called red wigglers, that you purchased from a worm grower.

To feed your worms, place small amounts of kitchen scraps in the bin and always cover the food completely with a couple inches of bedding. Do not stir the contents of the worm bin. After four months, harvest the vermicompost that has accumulated on the bottom of the worm bin. For instructions on how to do this and more details about setting up and maintaining a worm bin, visit this site: http://worms.ncsu.edu

— Rhonda Sherman

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Editor and Team Leader
Lucy Bradley, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, Urban Horticulture
Box 7609, NC State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-7609

Managing Editor: **Charlotte Glen**
Content Editor: **David Goforth**
Regional Editors, Coastal Plain and Sandhills: **Shawn Banks**
Regional Editor, Piedmont: **Randy Fulk**
Regional Editor, Mountains and Foothills: **Donna Teasley**
Production Editor and Designer: **Viki Balkcum**

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