

New Hybrids Shift Crapemyrtle Gardening Northward

HISTORY

In 1747, Lagerstroemia indica was introduced into the U.S. from China. The lovely bark and colorful flowers made them popular in our nation's warm regions. As interest grew northward they soon found short cold-snaps of 10°F would kill the plant back to its crown. At lower temps or extended freezes, the plants died outright with young specimens suffering the greatest losses. Thus, attempting to grow Crapemyrtle north of the Virginia peninsula was a fruitless endeavor. L. indica was also highly susceptible to mildews. Thus would be the challenges with Crapemyrtle for 200 years.

NEW HYBRIDS

On a scouting mission in Japan in 1955, Dr. John Creech of the National Arboretum discovered a new species, Lagerstroemia faurei. Although rather blah in flower, faurei (far'-ee-aye) seemed much harder and more disease resistant than L. indica. Dr. Creech brought this species to the U.S. and turned it over to Dr. Donald Egolf, an Arboretum hybridizer. What Egolf achieved following years of painstaking crosses was a new generation of Crapemyrtles exhibiting the glorious flowers of indica with the hardiness and disease resistance of faurei. He eventually selected dozens of tenacious, new hybrids and introduced them to the nation, naming each after a native American Indian tribe. Subsequently, using these hybrids and others, and germinating hundreds of thousands of seedlings, Dr. Carl Whitcomb of Oklahoma created some like-performers.

OUR FAVORITES

Years of site testing at BlewLabel® Shrub headquarters in New Jersey exposed some real winners out of these programs. Comparatively, these new hybrids exhibit much greater hardiness and higher mildew resistance. They have huge bloomheads that flower at least 90-120 days beginning in mid summer. Fall color is excellent red to pumpkin, and the exfoliating bark takes on an artistic mottling. These are best grown multi-stemmed, reserving the top half as a cloud of bloom and allowing the bottom half bare for enjoyment of the handsome bark.

Formerly, zone 7b (the DelMarVa peninsula) represented the northern most border of previous cultivar tolerance. These new Crapemyrtles are thriving in z7a, z6b and z6a, prospering throughout NJ, south-central and eastern PA and along coastal New England.

THE BEST OF THE BEST

'DYNAMITE' (WHITCOMB)

The reddest cherry red, grows ovalish 12-15'

'PINK VELOUR' (WHITCOMB)

Shrill pink blooms with dark wine foliage. Grows rounded 10-12'

'RHAPSODY IN PINK' (WHITCOMB)

Dark purple foliage w/ soft pink flowers, growing ovalish 10-12'

'TONTO' (NATIONAL ARBORETUM)

Later blooming deep rose growing ovalish 10-12'

'ZUNI' (NATIONAL ARBORETUM)

Soft lavender blooms, growing rounded 7-9'

SUCCESS STARTS YOUNG

The key is good root establishment. Gardeners from coastal DelMarVa and southward need only treat these as ordinary shrubs. With adequate moisture and a sunny spot they perform admirably. For those northward, we take one precaution the first couple winters.

Freeze dieback occurs worst on young crowns and thin stems. Install some time between mid spring and August. Once leaves drop in fall, secure a 2-3' barrier around your Crapemyrtle, using stakes and burlap. Fill this cavity with dried tree leaves. Do not pack them tight: leave them loose. Some settling will occur and exposed branches may dieback: that's okay.

In spring, remove the barrier and leaves. Spread 6 oz. of granular 10-10-10 fertilizer over the root zone, then reapply 3-4" of mulch to cover the root zone surface. Do not re-fertilize during the rest of the season. Once the plant begins growing, prune off any dead stems.

Repeat this protection program for a second winter. After that, your Crapemyrtle will do well on its own.