



PHOTO BY RACHEL FOSTER

So Many Myrtles

Unraveling the confusion and contradiction.

The name myrtle has been attached to a bewildering variety of plants.

The situation is particularly confusing on the West Coast, where myrtlewood bowls and ornaments are whittled from Oregon myrtle (*Umbellularia californica*), while the more common (at least in Oregon) and unrelated *Myrica californica* goes by the common name of California or Pacific wax-myrtle. The popular ground-cover plant periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is called myrtle by some people. Yet none of these is related to true myrtle (*Myrtis communis*), a charming Mediterranean plant with fragrant leaves and wood that belongs to the same family as eucalyptus, clove and guava. A dwarf form of true myrtle, now covered with fuzzy white flowers, lives in a pot on my deck.

In a warm Willamette Valley summer, another "myrtle," related to none of these, is more conspicuous than any of them. The scientific name for it is *Lagerstroemia*, so you may prefer to stick with crape myrtle, or, more correctly, crape-myrtle. (The hyphen indicates that some other plant has a better claim to the name myrtle. Hence also Douglas-fir, and rose-of-Sharon.)

Lagerstroemia indica is native to China. It is considered hardy in USDA Zone 7 but needs a hot summer to bloom well. When it gets the heat it needs, a big one can stop traffic with its showy, eight inch panicles of frilly, crape-textured flowers in white, pink, rose red or light purple. This year, crape-myrtles in the southern Willamette Valley began blooming in early August, but most years they appear in late August or September. Those years when we can scarcely ripen a tomato, the flowers may not open at all.

Crape-myrtles have more to offer besides their stunning flowers. I once saw a massive old crape-myrtle in front of a house in Ashland. It had a beautiful, low, broad head, with lovely branch patterns. I have never seen one as big as that in Eugene, for a very good reason. Every now and then, we'll have a freeze that will kill crape-myrtles to the ground, and this last happened in 1990-91, the winter before I moved here. Many plants have slowly grown back since then to form respectable small trees. They just have not reached their maximum breadth of crown.

Unlike every other plant I can think of named myrtle, crape-myrtles are deciduous. Before they drop, the small, glossy, deep-green leaves develop excellent fall color that varies (with location and variety)

from yellow to orange and russet. In winter you can admire the branch structure and the smooth, multicolored peeling bark. The leaves are red when they emerge in spring, so this is truly a plant of year-round interest.

The classic Chinese crape-myrtle grows into a multi-stemmed tree up to 25 feet tall, but there are dwarf (3-4 feet) and semi-dwarf (5-9 feet) varieties. And since they bloom on the current year's growth, any crape-myrtle can be pruned while dormant to control its size without complete loss of bloom. Pruning actually improves the size and quality of the flowers.

Semi-dwarf varieties of special interest in our zone are hybrids with Japanese crape-myrtle (*Lagerstroemia fauriei*). They are bushier in shape but can be trained into tree-form. They are somewhat harder than Chinese crape-myrtles, and can be expected to bloom a little earlier. They are also said to be more resistant to mildew. Look for them under Indian names like 'Zuni,' 'Hopi' and 'Pecos.' Do you have the right conditions for a crape-myrtle? They like lots of sun and need good drainage: Crape-myrtles don't demand great soil and will grow on clay, but they won't put up with wet feet. And because they are not absolutely cold-hardy, a location with protection from cold winds and frost is ideal.

I notice that *Sunset's Western Garden Book* describes these plants as drought tolerant and slow growing. *Plants that Merit Attention: Trees* (an excellent book originating, I believe, on the East Coast) says they are fast-growing and intolerant of drought. Since we don't live in California or the eastern U.S., I turned to *Trees and Shrubs for Pacific Northwest Gardens*, which says the plant "will grow in the Pacific Northwest but may not flower well because of our cooler summers. The plant likes good drainage, summer irrigation, and needs a warmer than average site to perform well in our climate." So there you have it.

Coming up: Friends of Scobert Gardens will hold the 6th Annual Whiteaker Plant Sale from 9 am to 2 pm Sunday, Sept. 28. Expect great variety, great prices, freebies. The sale is at Scobert Gardens, on 4th Avenue off Blair Boulevard. Proceeds help to fund activities at this lovely, vital neighborhood park. To donate plants, take them to the Gardens between 8 to 9 am or 5 to 6 pm Thursday, Sept. 26. To volunteer, call Ellen Schlesinger, 686-4646. **EW**

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