

EVERYTHING, IN ORDER

The Full Guide

Crepe myrtle care, start to finish.

The whole method in one place: what those shoots are, how to walk the tree each month, what form to grow, where the cut goes, how to bring a topped tree back, and what to do in every month of the Lafayette year. Print it, fold it, keep it in the shed.

1 · What you're looking at

A crepe myrtle is a tree with a shrub's instincts. Left alone it will throw growth from everywhere it can, and the parts of the plant behave differently.

- **Trunks.** Three to five of them on a multi-stem tree, or one on a single-stem. Smooth, mottled, exfoliating bark — the best feature the tree has, and the first thing hidden by neglect.
- **Branch collar.** The slight swelling where a branch meets a larger branch or trunk. It contains the tissue that seals a wound. Cut just outside it, never through it, never far beyond it.
- **Base shoots (suckers).** Fast, straight, soft growth from the root flare and lower trunks. They are not new trees; they are the plant hedging its bets.
- **Water sprouts.** The same thing higher up — vertical whips off a branch or an old cut, usually a response to stress or a hard cut.

2 · The monthly patrol

This is the whole maintenance program, and it takes about five minutes.

- Walk the tree once a month during the growing season, March through October.
- Snap or cut every shoot at the base and along the lower trunks while they are still soft and green. Soft shoots pull off cleanly; woody ones need pruners and leave a wound.
- Cut flush to the trunk or root flare. Do not leave a stub — a stub is a launch pad for three more shoots.
- Do not use herbicide or a string trimmer at the base. Trimmer damage to the bark causes more sucker growth than pruning ever will.

Why it's happening: suckering is a stress response. Common causes in Lafayette yards are topping, string-trimmer wounds at the base, mulch piled against the trunk, over-fertilized turf, a root-bound or too-deep planting, and drought stress on new trees.

3 • Decide what you're growing

Pick one form and make every future cut consistent with it. Switching back and forth is how trees end up shapeless.

Multi-stem (recommended)

Three to five trunks, evenly spaced, all rising from the base and flaring outward. Shows off the bark, reads as a tree, handles storms well. Choose your keepers early and remove everything else at ground level.

Single-stem

One clear trunk with the canopy starting above head height. Good for tight beds, sidewalks, and drive aprons. Requires the same monthly patrol, just with fewer keepers.

4 • Where to cut

- **Cut back to something.** Every cut goes to a larger branch, a trunk, or the ground. Never to thin air.
- **Cut just outside the branch collar.** The tree seals from the collar outward; cutting through it removes the tissue that closes the wound.
- **No stubs.** A stub can't seal, so it dies back and decays into the trunk.
- **Remove, don't shorten.** Take out crossing, inward, rubbing, dead, and crowded branches entirely. Do not head branches back to a random point.
- **Nothing bigger than needs be.** If you're removing wood thicker than your thumb every year, the tree is the wrong size for the spot, not the wrong shape.

Rule of thumb: if you need a chainsaw or a ladder for routine pruning of a crepe myrtle, stop and reconsider the plan.

5 • Crepe murder, and how to undo it

Every February, crews across Lafayette saw crepe myrtles off at the same height until the trunks end in swollen fists. It is the most common thing done to this tree, and the worst.

"It makes it bloom more."	It blooms later, on shoots too thin to hold a flower head up in a July storm. Bloom count goes down, droop goes up.
"It keeps it small."	The tree answers a hard cut with up to six feet of fast, weak growth. You are not controlling size; you are subscribing to a chore.
"Everybody does it."	Everybody does it because everybody saw it done. It arrived as a habit, not horticulture — and habits are breakable.

“The tree survives it.” Survival is a low bar. Flat cuts that big can't seal, so decay walks straight into the trunk and the knuckles get heavier every year.

It is reversible. Three growing seasons, not a replanting budget.

- **Year 1 — stop topping.** Let it sprout. The following late winter, keep only the one to three strongest, best-angled shoots on each knuckle and remove the rest flush.
- **Year 2 — thin the keepers.** Those keepers are branches now. Thin them like ordinary branches; nothing gets headed back.
- **Year 3 — the knuckles disappear.** The canopy closes over the old cuts and the silhouette reads as a tree again.

Hopeless cases: cut every trunk off at ground level in late winter, let the roots send up a forest of shoots, then select three to five new trunks the next winter. Two to four years to a properly structured young tree.

6 · The 12-month Lafayette calendar

Jan	Dormant. Look at structure with the leaves off. Plan cuts; don't rush them.
Feb	Structural pruning window. Remove crossing, dead, and crowded wood. No topping, ever.
Mar	Last call for structural cuts. Buds are moving. Start the monthly base patrol.
Apr	Leaf-out. Rub off base shoots by hand while they're soft.
May	Patrol. Five minutes. Watch for trimmer damage at the base.
Jun	Bloom begins. Leave the canopy alone. Base patrol only.
Jul	Peak bloom. Water deeply in drought. No pruning.
Aug	Deadhead spent heads if you want a second flush. Nothing structural.
Sep	Bloom winds down. Keep patrolling the base.
Oct	Growth slows. Last base patrol of the season.
Nov	Leaf drop. Rake and mulch — keep mulch off the trunk.
Dec	Dormant. Bark season. Do nothing and enjoy it.

Take the pledge at cutthecrepe.com — 500 yards by February. That's when the chainsaws come out.

Cut the Crepe. It's a pun. It's also an instruction.