



Purple Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia*
'Purple Magic' PP23906
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Rikki Tikki Rouge (*Lagerstroemia*
indica 'SMNLING' PPAF)
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Creative crape myrtles

Covering many climates and color options, *Lagerstroemia* is a reliable seller for growers

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

LAGESTROEMIA (CRAPE MYRTLE) IS thought of as a southern U.S. plant, yet it is on the City of Portland street tree list and has grown in Oregon for more than a century. A pair of crape myrtle Portland Heritage Trees can be viewed at **Van Veen Nursery** in Portland.

Southerners cherish it for its blooms, heat tolerance and four-season interest, according to Paul Bonine, co-owner and grower at the retail nursery **Xera Plants** (Portland, Oregon). It is a valuable addition to the landscape and garden, especially for those interested in late-season blooming plants. More recently, gardeners and landscapers of both the northeastern and southern U.S. are finding more uses for existing crape myrtle. The plants that made their mark a generation ago and those introduced recently by breeders are serving the market by showing a wide palette of forms and growth habits, proven disease resistance, extended bloom period and suitability for colder climates.

In exploring the plant's best uses and the varieties that are receiving attention, no discussion is possible without first mentioning the woes of *Lagerstroemia*'s common name.

Is it one word, crapemyrtle?

Or two words with an "e" in "crepe" or an "a" in "crape" instead? There is no definitive ruling right now, although "crape myrtle" and the one word "crapemyrtle" seem to dominate, and "crepe" creeps in, depending on what you're reading.

Some references that have settled on one word can end up either splitting the one word into two in different places, or mixing

up the "e" version with the "a" version — often on the same page. Media sources tend to use more "crepe" than the horticultural and research sources, which tend toward "crape" or the one word "crapemyrtle." For the purposes of this article, we're using two words and an "a."

The confusion with crape myrtles may lie not only with the name, but their habit as well. The same hybrid can be listed in one source as a tree and another as a shrub. Crape myrtle can be trained to a single or multibranched habit. Many varieties are identified as being candidates for gentle pruning to keep them smaller, even as they naturally mature to be a larger tree.

Winning qualities

Crape myrtles may have lower water needs than other plants, but they need regular irrigation for reliable blooming. They thrive in soil with minimum nutrition and in intense heat and sun conditions — which accounts for their widespread popularity in the South — but only take off with watering.

"They need water for best performance," Bonine said. "They are not drought-tolerant like *Manzanita*."

"Slowly designers and other pros are



Previous page, bottom: Bailey propagates and trials crape myrtle for desirable traits.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY.

learning how these trees grow and what they need in the Willamette Valley,” said Carol Lindsay, a Portland-based residential landscape designer. “They have so much to offer.”

Lindsay said the heat- and sun-loving qualities help clarify crape myrtle’s winning attributes. From a designer’s point of view, in competition with other trees for sun, like *Styrax* (snowbell) or *Heptacodium* (seven son flower), crape myrtle is a winner, especially for its four-season color and year-round interest. Clients know those terms and use them when filling out her questionnaire, she said.

“This tree has got it all: blooms, bark, amazing sinuous beauty when mature and when bare, the beauty of the shape, plus so many sizes and shapes of the tree,” Lindsay said. Crape myrtle also works with other plants, allowing for an

understory design, unlike other trees such as *Magnolia*.

“And if that isn’t a good enough selling point, we can talk about the leaves that just evaporate,” Lindsay said. The leaves degrade in place after dropping in fall; they just “melt.” Other attractive qualities: Crape myrtle have a shallow, fibrous root system so they don’t lift sidewalks; they have a svelte caliper; are magnets for pollinators; and the older they get, the freer they bloom, blooming earlier in the year.

They just need heat — the hottest location possible in Pacific Northwest gardens paired with regular water. Each crape myrtle needs a certain number of days above 85 F to bloom reliably here, according to Bonine. Xera Plants only sells ones that are on the lower end of that spectrum. Plus, they pair well with other

heat-loving plants because they don’t have greedy roots.

“The average homeowner, they think they need arborvitae, by why not crape myrtle?” Lindsay asks.

Placement of crape myrtle can also be versatile. With mature heights ranging from a few feet up to 20–25 feet, and putting on a show during all four seasons, crape myrtle can work as a focal point, outside a kitchen window, for example, or as a screen between small urban plots. Crape myrtle overall tend to be fast growing, at about 1–3 feet per year minimum, until they reach their ultimate height, when they slow down.

As trends go, “we’re seeing a lot of interest in smaller varieties, which makes sense as a lot of the new developments are packing more houses into the same spaces,” said Justin Hancock, senior direc- ➤

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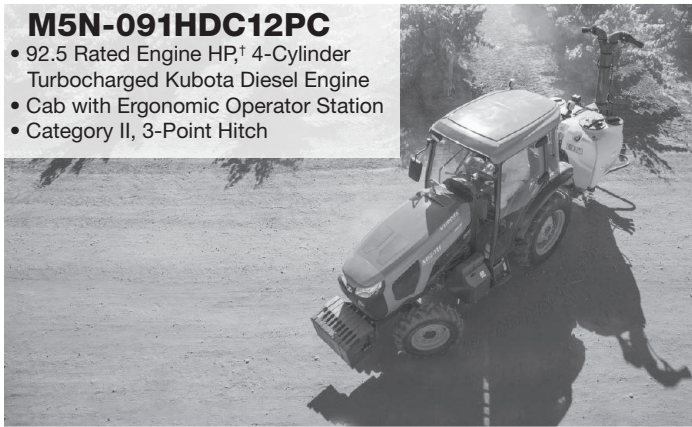
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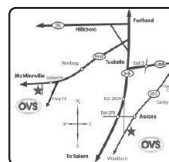
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Creative crape myrtles

tor of marketing at **Monrovia Nursery** (Dayton, Oregon). His nursery sells 20 varieties of crape myrtle.

The Monrovia Petite series (USDA Hardiness Zone 7–9) of fast-growing shrubs fills that niche, maturing at a manageable 5-feet by 4-feet and ranging in bloom colors from white (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Monow’ Petite Snow™ crape myr-

tle) to deep rosy-red (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Moners’ Petite Embers™ crape myrtle).

Bellini® Grape (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Congrabel’ PP28975) is another dwarf variety that deserves a second look, according to Hancock. It has many early-blooming dark lavender flowers on a compact, cold hardy (down to Zone 5), low-mounding 3–4 feet tall and wide habit.

Groundbreaking Egolf hybrids

The top selling varieties at Monrovia are *Lagerstroemia indica* × *fauriei* ‘Tuscarora’ (dark coral pink bloom; 20–20-feet by 10–15 feet; Zone 6–9); *Lagerstroemia indica* × *fauriei* ‘Natchez’ (white bloom; 20–20 feet by 10–15 feet; Zone 6–9); and the semi-dwarf *Lagerstroemia indica* × *fauriei* ‘Tonto’ (fuchsia; 8 feet by 8 feet; Zone 6–9).

All three varieties were released between 1980 and 1990 from the breeding program at the National Arboretum (Washington, D.C.) run by the late Donald Egolf. In the interest of creating more disease-resistant and cold-hardy plants, Egolf crossed *L. fauriei* from Japan for its cold hardiness with *L. indica* from the Himalayas in Asia. Egolf’s work led to 20 introductions, named after Native American tribes. When introduced, they almost instantly began to dominate the market, and still do today.

“All the old varieties were mildew prone,” Bonine said. The hybrids were not.

‘Natchez’, a straightforward white bloom with attractive bark, joins *Lagerstroemia indica* × *fauriei* ‘Muskogee’ (another introduction by Egolf, in 1978) as continual bestsellers. ‘Muskogee’ has a light lavender bloom, and a bigger, taller form at 30 feet, ‘Natchez’, ‘Muskogee’, and ‘Tuscarora’ are all highlighted on the City of Portland street tree list.

With its very low heat requirement for blooming, *Lagerstroemia indica* × *fauriei* ‘Cheyenne’, the last release in the Petite series, is matched well to the western Oregon climate, according to Bonine. Raspberry-red blooms grow on large trusses from July to September. Bred with *L. indica*, *L. fauriei* and *L. limii*, the globose tree matures 8 feet tall and wide over 12 years. It displays reddish to chocolate-brown exfoliating bark as it ages, and orange to red leaves in fall. Another in the series, *L. fauriei* ‘Pecos’, larger at 15 feet, is equally well-adapted to western Oregon. It bears large pink flower trusses with the same showy bark and fall foliage of maroon to red.

Monrovia has had an uptick in production in the last few years of two others from the National Arboretum series: *Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Catawba’ (dark purple blooms with bronzy spring foliage; 15 feet by 14 feet; Zone 7–9), and ‘Arapaho’, (red blooms and maroon-tinged foliage; 20 feet by 10 feet; Zone 6–9), which Lindsay uses in her designs



Lagerstroemia indica × *fauriei* ‘Natchez’
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More recently, for its white bloom, Lindsay has specified a sister seedling of 'Natchez', *Lagerstroemia* 'Sarah's Favorite' (introduced by Tom Dodd Nursery in Semmes, Alabama), which some are calling an improved 'Natchez'. The mature height is smaller, reaching 18–20 feet tall. Its fall foliage comes in earlier and is more orange-red, the flowers are upright and the bark is more orange than rust.

Whitcomb introductions

According to Bonine, newer introductions have capitalized on Egolf's success with mildew resistance, yielding cultivars with varying forms and brighter bloom colors of *Lagerstroemia indica*.

Such varieties include the true red Dynamite® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit II' PP10296, 15–20 feet by 10–15 feet),

introduced in 1997 by another prolific crape myrtle breeder, Carl Whitcomb (Lacebark, Inc. in Stillwater, Oklahoma).

"When that came out, it became the second most popular crape myrtle, second to 'Natchez,'" Bonine said.

Then came Red Rocket® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit V' PP11312, 15–20 feet by 10–15 feet, Zone 6–9), another Whitcomb introduction. It is a fast grower at approximately 5 feet per year, but a smaller tree that makes it a good option for smaller plots, according to Lindsay. The same goes for the newer and also smaller *Lagerstroemia indica* 'Centennial Spirit' (18 feet by 9 feet, Zone 6), introduced by Oklahoma State University. It blooms into October; rose-red blooms in cooler weather and richer red at hotter temperatures.

For a smaller stature, the popu-

lar semi-dwarf Double Feature® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit IX' PP23559; 4 feet by 4 feet; Zone 7–10) sports wine-red spring foliage that turns to green. It starts showing blooming ruby-red flowers in July and then continuously through frost off the same scape. "They're popular, relatively new and work in the Northwest," Bonine said.

"The industry sees a high demand for red flower color," said Megan Mathey, ornamental plant breeder at **Spring Meadow Nursery** (Grand Haven, Michigan), a wholesale shrub liner nursery and developer and distributor of Proven Winners® ColorChoice® shrubs.

Spring Meadow continues to add new Whitcomb varieties to ones it already >>



Red Rocket® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit V' PP11312)

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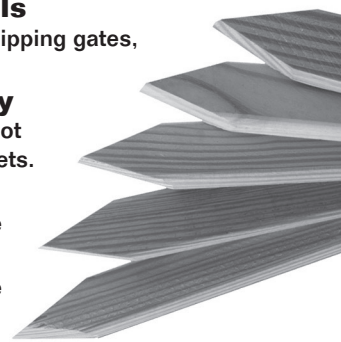
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sells, like the recently introduced Double Dynamite® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit X' PP27085), with vibrant flowers in a cherry-red color (8–10 feet by 8–12 feet, Zone 7-10) that never seeds, so it blooms all season.

Spring Meadow breeding efforts

In 2007, Spring Meadow embarked on its own breeding program, interested in matching disease resistance and full-flower coverage with winter hardiness, to bring crape myrtle farther north.

By 2014, the Proven Winners Infinitini® series of compact shrubs, 2–4 feet tall and wide, was introduced from genetics developed by Mike Uchneat of Garden Genetics (Bellefonte, Pennsylvania), the inventor of the Wave® petunia.

"He was doing something different," Mathey said. "He was making harsh selections, and everything had to bloom that first season."

As a result, Infinitini plants — in white, pinks and purple — can handle the heat and the cold, even dying back in winter and coming back in spring.

"We conservatively list these varieties as Zone 6, but they have survived over seven winters in one of our Zone 5 test sites," Mathey said.

Then came the Rikki Tikki® series, in pink and ruby-red (with more colors to come later), developed by Mathey. It is in an intermediate size of 3–5 feet tall and wide — still compact — with burgundy new growth in spring, summer-long blooms, and a cold tolerance down to Zone 6. As well, Rikki Tikki Rouge (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'SMNLIMG' PPAF) summer foliage matures to a contrasting red, silver and green.

High demand for crape myrtle is still centered in the southern U.S. up to the D.C. area, according to Mathey. However, these colder, hardier types are creating some demand as far north as Ohio. Mathey expects that northern market will continue to develop.

"People in the North just don't believe they can grow crape myrtle," Mathey said. "But they will."

Even as the nursery focuses on breeding cold-hardy types, there is the duality of crape myrtles like Infinitini Watermelon® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'G2X133181' PP29007). It is a favorite of Mathey's for its bright fuchsia-pink flowers, that works as a good foundation plant in the heat of the South, as well as a good dieback shrub in the North that returns each spring.

Bailey breeding efforts

In Kansas at one of Bailey's locations, Natalia Hamill, brand and business development manager, also promotes crape myrtle as a dieback shrub. "It is used as summer color, blooming in the absolute heat of summer, in fierce conditions, when others have cycled out of bloom," she said.

Bailey has locations in Kansas, Minnesota, Illinois, Washington and Georgia, and two in Oregon. While liners and cuttings of crape myrtle are grown at various locations, all crape myrtles sold as finished plants are produced at the Yamhill, Oregon nursery, said David Roberts, general manager and head breeder at Bailey Innovations™ (Winterville, Georgia), home of Bailey's breeding and trialing programs.

Bailey uses "crapemyrtle," one word, the same adopted by the National Arboretum and breeder Michael Dirr

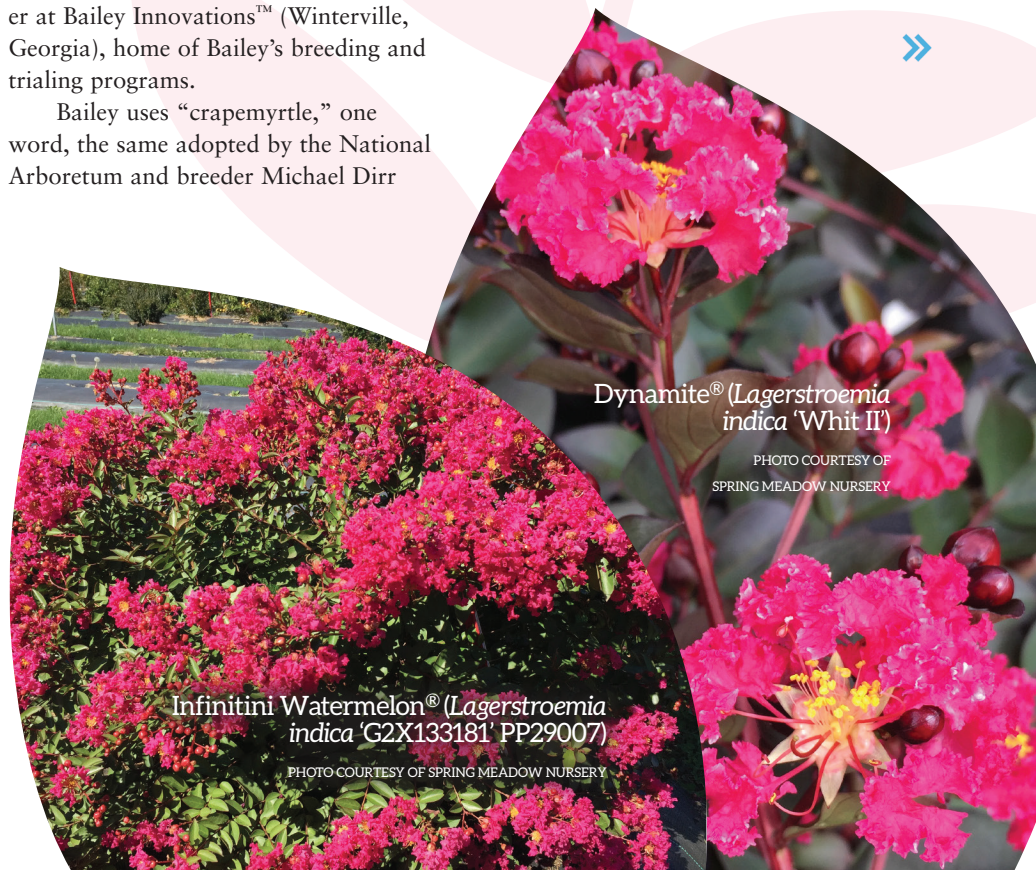
of Plant Introductions Inc. (PII) in Watkinsville, Georgia. Bailey in 2015 acquired PII, where several crape myrtles had been developed and introduced between 2013 and 2016 under the Bailey First Editions® Magic line.

Since the PPI purchase, Bailey has retained several crape myrtles in its line that were steady sellers and replaced others. According to Hamill, it included a mix of green-leaf and dark-leaf varieties.

"Crape myrtle is easy to propagate," Roberts said. "You can take a cutting, and within a season have a saleable plant. They're susceptible to a few diseases and pests, but nothing like rose."

One determination for whether Bailey will add more varieties going forward is disease resistance, especially to *Cercospora* leaf spot, which crape myrtle is susceptible to, as well as powdery mildew. They also want better or different features, like dark leaf, reblooming, and a longer bloom season.

"For anything we introduce, we want to be able to talk about how this plant is significantly better and why," Hamill said.



Dynamite® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit II')

PHOTO COURTESY OF
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Infinitini Watermelon® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'G2X133181' PP29007)

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Roberts believes the market is still focusing on a few forms and types of crape myrtle, like ‘Natchez’, which is used widely because it is one of the most popular ones grown to large sizes. But the diverse sizes and forms — including egg, umbrella and fastigate, and a wider range of leaf and flower colors in the last 10 years — offer the opportunity to better fit crape myrtle to a specific space.

‘Natchez’, for instance, is much taller than other varieties. According to Roberts, this leads some homeowners to commit what’s commonly called “crape murder” — the unceremonious lopping off of the tree’s top. Sometimes it’s done to maintain a smaller size and other times under the mistaken belief that this hatchet job increases the number of blooms, when in actuality it weakens the plant and ruins its shape.

Black leaf crape myrtles

With the Magic series, Bailey worked to provide a range of sizes and habits to choose from, including several with leaf color so dark they are almost considered black — a trend in crape myrtle breeding.

Black leaf varieties gained a foothold in breeding beginning with a Mississippi State University discovery that was patented in 2009 as *Lagerstroemia* × ‘Chocolate Mocha’ PP21540. With dark leaves that did not fade into summer, it first came to market as Delta Jazz™ after licensing by Plant Development Services Inc. (Loxley, Alabama).

Cecil Pounders then developed the unpatented Ebony series, which is the source of the Black Diamond® series developed by J. Berry Nursery (Grand Saline, Texas). The combination of jet-black foliage and a ketchup-red flower in the series is a dramatic combination, according to Bonine.

The white-bloomed, vase-shaped Moonlight Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia* ‘PIILAG-IV’ PPAF; 8–12 feet by 4–6 feet; Zone 7–9), one of Bailey’s currently sold crape myrtles, also originated from the open-pollinated seed of ‘Chocolate Mocha’ and was developed by Josh Kardos at PPI. Lunar Magic® (*Lagerstroemia* ‘Baillagone’ PP30360), intro-



Center Stage™ Red
(*Lagerstroemia indica*
‘SMNLICBF’)

PHOTO COURTESY OF
SPRING MEADOW NURSERY

duced just three years ago, is rounder and shorter in stature. It grows to a maximum of 10 feet with prolific white blooms, dark foliage and trials show incredible disease resistance and cold hardiness.

The other two dark-leaf cultivars in the series, Sunset Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia* ‘PIILAG-IX’ PP29325; red blooms; 5–10 feet by 4–8 feet, Zone 7–9) is the compact choice, and Twilight Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia* ‘PIILAG-VIII’ PP27194; 16 feet by 8 feet; Zone 7–9) is the full-size offering, reaching as high as ‘Natchez’ with dark pink blooms.

Purple Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia* ‘Purple Magic’ PP23906; 7–8 feet by 7–8 feet) is Bailey’s best-selling green-leaf variety, a mid-size offering that reblooms heavily with purple blooms if stage pruned. Ruffled Red Magic™ (*Lagerstroemia* ‘PIILAG-VII’ PP27303) is larger (12 feet by 8 feet), with dense branching, upright habit, high disease resistance and red carnation-like blooms.

Spring Meadow’s focus on developing a black leaf crape myrtle led to the recent introduction of Center Stage™ Red (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘SMNLICBF’ USPPAF; 6–12 feet by 8 feet), developed by Mathey, with its dramatic match of very disease-resistant velvety black foliage and rich red blooms.

“In our minds, it’s kind of revolutionary,” Mathey said. “Because there are already many black-leaved varieties, we wanted to make sure that it is better or different [than others out there].” Center Stage has been extremely disease-resistant in trials and was selected for its highly branching habit and earlier blooming — in the first year after being potted up.



Twilight Magic™
(*Lagerstroemia*
‘PIILAG-VIII’ PP27194)
PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY

This success has Spring Meadow looking at a black-leaf tree form type, but there are no plans to introduce one at this point.

Growing interest in Oregon

Brian Bradshaw of Bradshaw Nursery (Forest Grove, Oregon) is a grower and a plant broker of crape myrtle, bringing in plants from the southern U.S., where larger caliper trees grow to size quicker.

“It takes eight to nine years [in Oregon] to get to two-inch caliper, where it takes four years in the South,” he said.

Bradshaw usually buys the larger caliper material, although he grows some varieties to size and also focuses on larger multibranched plants. He shapes and grows them for the best results for his landscaper customer base.

Shipments from the South, he learned, are best received locally in late winter, before they leaf out and bloom there, to better acclimate to local temperatures and weather here. The smaller the size, the more the crape myrtles need



Lunar Magic®
(*Lagerstroemia*
‘Baillagone’ PP30360)
PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY



Sunset Magic™
(Lagerstroemia
'PILLAG-IX' PP29325)
PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY

greenhouse storage to protect them before setting them outside.

Bradshaw added crape myrtle to his inventory about 10 years ago, and the inventory and varieties have evolved over time as he learned which plants grow and sell best. A changing climate and migration from California and the South have contributed to increased interest in crape myrtle in the area, as well as newer plants and the black leaf varieties.

He buys varieties that are proven growers and reliable bloomers in the cooler summers of the Pacific Northwest. His landscaper customers request bush types and tree types equally; it's the bloom color that is usually the deciding factor.

His top sellers that he stocks continually read like a patriotic list of red, white, and blue: 'Tuscarora', 'Natchez', and 'Muskogee'. Bradshaw is continually looking to stock red bloomers, but they're harder to source in larger sizes. He has supplied *Lagerstroemia indica* 'Watermelon Red' (which is more a pink, but it has the word red in it, so it is requested) and Dynamite® (*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Whit II').

"There are darker colors," he said, "but they get fungus, and I hate doing that [to customers], so I steer away them from them."

With a growing interest by breeders, landscapers and home gardeners in crape myrtle, the hope is that, over time, inventory of larger sizes will increase to meet demand and increase diversity of types in landscapes and gardens. ☺

Tracy Ilene Miller is a freelance writer and editor who covers several topics, including gardening. She can be reached at tracyilenemiller@gmail.com.

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