

**By Buzz Bertolero**

*The Dirt Gardener*

**Q: We replaced a big ash tree with two crape myrtles. The pink-blooming tree has five or six upward-pointing branches. At the ends of the branches are what I think are seedpods. The white crape myrtle has easily a dozen sideways- and downward-pointing branches. I'm a little concerned that this tree will not have an upright growth habit, like it's pink cousin. Will pruning and removing the seedpods cause the tree to grow upright? Also, what should I do to encourage the growth?**

**A:** Crape myrtle is a very popular summer-blooming, deciduous tree; although, there are some varieties that flower in September. They're a low- to medium-size tree that also produces some very nice fall color.

The species has a number of varieties that have some distinct characteristics such as mildew resistance; large, bold leaves; a stiff, upright growth habit; and peeling bark, just to mention a few. Each species has a range of colors, so there are several whites, pinks, reds, etc.

From your description, you have two different varieties; so the shape of these trees is not going to be mirror images of each other. Pruning will help, but it's not going to erase the differences.

Crape myrtles are pruned during the winter months. They can be pruned severely, lightly or somewhere in between; it just doesn't matter.

On the white-flowering variety, I'd look to remove the side growth, keeping the larger upright branches, and then fertilize to encourage the new growth. Fertilizer is also critical to each year's blooming cycle as crape myrtles bloom only on the first-year or current wood.

Little to no new growth is the primary cause for the trees to stop blooming.

With young trees, fertilize twice a year with 16-16-16. You would apply a half-pound of fertilizer per inch of trunk diameter, measured two feet off the ground. It is spread under the drip line and not piled at the trunk of the tree. The first application can be done anytime after pruning through the end of March, with the follow-up feeding in May or June. With established trees, one application is all that is necessary.

You're correct that the structures at the ends of the crape myrtle stems are the seedpods. After flowering, a cluster of green, round seedpods form. They vary in size depending on the variety.

The clusters mature in the late summer or early fall and then rupture. The seed is scattered around by the wind. Fortunately, they're sterile, so they don't become a nuisance popping up everywhere the next year. What's left at the end of the stems is the brownish-colored casing that should be removed annually.

After the flush of growth, I'd stand back and take a critical look at the canopy of the trees. If they continue to look dissimilar, I'd then consider replacing one before it gets too big.

Check the label on the desirable tree for the correct variety. It should be available in white but probably not until late May.

*Buzz Bertolero is Executive Vice President of Navlet's Garden Centers and a California Certified Nursery Professional. His web address is [www.dirgardener.com](http://www.dirgardener.com) and you can send questions by email to [dirtgarden@aol.com](mailto:dirtgarden@aol.com) or to 360 Civic Drive, Ste. "D," Pleasant Hill, CA 94523, and on Facebook at [Facebook.com/Buzz-Bertolero](https://www.facebook.com/Buzz-Bertolero).*

