A Quick Primer for the Next Generation of Southern Gardeners

We have all gasped as we’ve turned a corner and witnessed what once was a beautiful, tree-form crepe myrtle, left bare and whacked off to a nub. The poor specimen, a victim to crape murder, has been left to form a gnarled ball of knuckles each time it sprouts back. It’s all too common to see a stately magnolia whose sweeping lower branches have been removed to “limb-up” a tree that should have its skirt brushing the ground like an antebellum southern belle. What about the lovely mounded boxwoods down the street whose new owners cranked up the electric trimmers and buzzed a flat top over the whole lot of them? This is a sampling of the type of infractions we seasoned southern gardeners might report to each other in a whisper, with the hair standing on the backs of our necks. We know better.

We now have a new generation of gardeners gathering their tools and gumption to step out into the world of gardening. To many of them, the aforementioned errors are akin to the “red shoes” that my grandmother insisted were reserved for children or women of ill-repute. They may have heard that one should not do these things, but have yet to hear why not.

As a landscape architect that has been in practice for over twenty years, I am thrilled to witness a new generation coming along that has a fresh passion for gardening and contributing to the beauty of the landscape. It is encouraging to see their desire to reconnect with the land around us and to be good stewards of it. Our Millennials are championing more environmentally sensitive ways of gardening and to our amazement, are putting their phones down to dig in the dirt a while! That means we have a responsibility to share with them what we know.

Yes, some throw in the towel when they realize the “all natural” concoction of kitchen ingredients they have mixed up (according to an Instagram post) … does not, in fact, cure their plant’s ailments. Thankfully, however, many dry their eyes and forge ahead. Herein lies the reason I chose this topic for my first Landscape Design Newsletter. I wanted to provide you
with a simple outline of these few garden design “no-nos” (that we all know) along with a sharable explanation of why these simple practices are important. I am hoping that it will inspire you to grab the arm of a millennial you may know and go for a walk through the neighborhood. Share with them, while pointing out examples (good or bad) of the few things covered herein. I think you will be just as encouraged as I have been in how they take to it.

The Proper Way to Trim a Boxwood

When commencing to trim a boxwood, start with a sharp, clean pair of hedge shears. The ones with about a ten-inch blade work nicely. It is also a good idea to make sure there is some form of shock absorbency to save the wear and tear on your hands. Resist the urge to use electric hedge trimmers. They tear the leaves as they cut and make the leaf more susceptible to disease and pests. They can also leave unsightly brown scarring.

Keep the overall shape of the boxwood in a mounded form. The goal is to make sure that the top is never wider than the base of the plant. See diagram below. Wherever the shrub is trimmed, the apical end of that branch is then encouraged to branch out and grow. If you only trim across the top of the plant, the new growth is encouraged on the top, and the stems underneath will get broader and taller. This eventually leads to a shrub that is leggy underneath with a broad top.

While the shape of the boxwood is a design issue and not a horticultural one, usually the reason for planting the boxwood in the first place was to contribute to the overall landscape design. Boxwoods are used in a variety of design situations, all of which require the shrub to have a ‘full to the ground’ appearance. This can only be achieved by maintaining the top narrower than the bottom even if the sides and top are flat for applications such as a formal hedge. Boxwoods are usually used as a softening element to foundational plantings, or to accent entries or focal points. Both applications visually ease the transition of the built environment to the landscape.
The most common boxwood used in the south is the Japanese Littleleaf Boxwood (Buxus microphylla japonica). It is a hardy variety that takes to pruning well. It is, however, a fast grower and usually requires more than one clipping a year to keep it a desired shape or size. The Korean and Harlandii varieties are slower growing alternatives for smaller hedges but are slightly vase shaped in their natural growth habit. This can make it a challenge to keep them trimmed so that they do not get an exposed, strong central trunk and look leggy underneath.

How *Not* to Commit “Crape Murder”

The crape myrtle has been with us a very long time. Native to China and Korea, some say it was introduced about thirty years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The most common crape myrtles gracing the south these days are Lagerstroemia indica and L. indica X L. fauriei hybrids. There is a list of varieties (dwarf and tree form) about a mile long and growing each year with new introductions. Flower colors run the gamut from fiery red to pink, white, and even bright lavenders.

The hardy shrub or small to medium tree has the wonderful and irresistible ability to sprout back profusely from a pruned woody stem or trunk. This even happens if all leaves are removed and the plant is cut back nearly to the ground. This phenomenon, along with the fact that pruning helps to encourage more flowering, created the birthing ground of what we like to call “crape murder.” Despite the name, crape murder does not indeed kill the plant, just after the act, some of us wish it were put out of its misery. There are two facets to crape murder. The first is when a stem or branch is cut in the same location every year so that it develops scars that look like a gnarled bunch of knuckles. The other is when a nice tree form crape myrtle is cut drastically back to one point on the trunk where the new growth will create a mass of new shoots all in one ball the next spring. Both are unsightly when considering the potential the plant has to be beautiful, both in the winter and warm months.

Pruning a crape myrtle is not in itself an evil deed. Having the knowledge of *how* and *why* you are pruning, equips you to achieve the best aesthetic for your landscape. It is important to first understand that there are two basic useful forms of crape myrtles in landscape design. There are tree forms, and shrub forms, and each has its place. Both can be pruned, and there are three main reasons as to why you would do so. The first reason is to promote blossoms, the second is to direct the shape or growth of the plant, and the third is to remove dead or diseased wood.

Shrub form crape myrtles are usually dwarf varieties that are slow growers and are easy to maintain in shrub form. Their leafy branches start near the ground and are great for a medium hedge or shrub mass in the landscape. They benefit from pruning back to the ground when woody stems start to show from underneath or flowering begins to wane.

Tree forms are usually the larger, faster-growing varieties such as the L. indica x L. fauriei hybrids, such as the classic, (and my favorite) ‘Natchez.’ They can be multi-trunked (my preference) or trained into a single trunk (called ‘standard form’ in nursery talk). They have a lovely bark and elegant vase-like structure that can be interesting and beautiful, even through
the winter months with no leaves. These varieties should be planted where they have room to become a small or medium tree. They require very little pruning and are usually the victims of crape murder.

**When it’s ok to prune...**

- Pruning any dead wood or disease from the tree is a good thing to do.
- Pruning suckers or small shoots from the base of the tree, allowing the beautiful smooth trunk to take center stage is perfectly acceptable and desirable.
- If you are very careful to do it properly, it is also acceptable to remove any branches that turn and grow toward the center of the crown, crossing the other branches. This enhances the tree’s natural tendency to grow in an elegant vase shape.
- Lastly, if you absolutely have to see more blossoms on the tree, and you will not live another day unless you do, you may carefully trim the outer branches in a natural pattern. Please understand that the tree will branch wherever it is cut. The goal is for it to look so natural that no one will ever suspect you intervened in any way.

Featured in the photo above, are ‘Natchez’ crape myrtles in Cairo, Georgia. I can remember when they were planted nearly twenty five years ago. They stand as a beautiful testament to correct pruning and to providing landscape interest beyond just their blooms. I could not bring myself to include a photo of a poor victim of crape murder, knowing that none of us have to travel very far to see one.

If the tree becomes too large for its location, consider cutting it to the ground and maintaining it as a shrub form or removing the plant altogether.
Stop! Don’t Limb Up that Magnolia!

Magnolia grandiflora is an indispensable part of our southern heritage. Our frigid northern friends drool over our ability to grow this beauty with ease. The magnolia has a unique set of talents and deserves just the right spot in the landscape to show them off. Its natural form is to grow all the way to the ground in a roughly conical shape. It loves the sun and thrives in our moist heat. It is fullest in habit and flowers best when it has plenty of room and is basking in full sun.

When planted in the right location, it only needs watering while it is getting established or in a dry spell. Other than that, it likes to be left alone. There is no need to even go beyond that beautiful skirt of glossy coarse leaves unless you are a child looking for a great place to make a hidden fort.

If the limbs on the bottom of the tree are removed, then there is the dilemma of what to do underneath. The magnolia naturally develops many surface roots underneath the drip-line of the canopy. This makes mowing nearly impossible and walking dangerous because of the trip hazard. Grass does not like to grow there, and leaf maintenance is constant. Many people like to plant groundcovers like aspidistra between the big surface roots. This works to soften the awkward base of the tree aesthetically; however, the tree is then left to compete for nutrients with the groundcover. In short, it is best to let the tree grow into its natural habit. My favorite way to incorporate the magnolia grandiflora into one of my designs is to place it in a large open area, incorporated into a bed that is as wide as the dripline of the tree.

The dwarf varieties, such as Magnolia grandiflora ‘Little Gem,’ play by the same rules when it comes to removing lower limbs. Do not do it. They do not mind, however, a little pruning on the tips of the branches. This can help the tree to create a denser growth habit. The ‘Little Gem’ is a versatile small tree, and I have used it both as a hedge and an espalier. In those applications, prune away!

Now, go grab yourself some unsuspecting newbie gardener by the arm and have fun walking through these essential garden tips with them. The South will be better off for it!
A Note…
What a joy to join the ranks of the GCG Board and learn from those that have gone before. I would like to extend a special thank you to Jackie Fulmer, the previous Landscape Design Editor for her time and encouragement.

An Announcement…
Landscape Design Schools will be offered in Rome by The Laurel District and The Rome Federated Garden Clubs. Dates for the classes are: August 7 & 8; November 20 & 21; February 12 & 13, 2020 and April 28 & 29, 2020. To register go to www.romefederatedgardenclubs.com and go to the “News” tab and there you can print a registration form.