

Plant of the Month July – Lagerstroemia

Crapemyrtles have graced the landscapes of the Mid-Atlantic and Southern States for a long time, but they have come into the public eye increasingly in the last 10 years. Significant work to increase their winter hardiness was done at the National Arboretum by the legendary plant breeder Dr. Don Egolf and his colleagues. Since then, even more striking cultivars have come from Dr. Carl Whitcomb. Because they all start blooming in the beginning of July and continue for the rest of the summer, they are a much needed spot of color for any sunny landscape. Zone 6 Lagerstroemias are now available in a wide range of sizes and colors.

Largest Lagerstroemias (which seem to be the hardiest):

- 'Muskogee' - lavender-pink flowers
- 'Natchez' - white blooms

Their size range is up to 20 feet. All crapemyrtles have interesting exfoliating bark with smooth, mottled colored patches appearing as they age, but Natchez's coloring is really spectacular, combining shades of tan, cinnamon and brown for unusual winter interest.

Large Lagerstroemias with very showy summer flowers are:

- 'Tuskegee' (hot coral-pink)
- 'Tuscarora' (hot coral-pink)
- 'Arapaho' (bright red)
- 'Carolina Beauty' (bright red)
- 'Dynamite' (deep red)
- 'Red Rocket' (Whit IV) (bright red)

If they have a Native American cultivar name, you can bet they are from the National Arboretum's program.

Midsized Lagerstroemias (8'-15') offer an even greater range of colors, both in flower and foliage. The National Arboretum selections most easily found in the trade are:

- 'Acoma' (white, 10')
- 'Catawba' (lavender-purple, 8')
- 'Hopi' (medium pink, 8')
- 'Sioux' (dark pink, 15')
- 'Tonto' (cherry red, 15')
- 'Zuni' (lavender, 8')

Dr. Whitcomb's introductions combine equal hardiness with strikingly beautiful bronze and burgundy new foliage. His midsized cultivars include:

- 'Burgundy Cotton' (Whit VI) (white, 12')
- 'Pink Velour' (Whit III) (dark pink, 10')
- 'Prairie Lace' (pink and white bicolor, 10')
- 'Raspberry Sundae' (Whit I) (dark pink bi-color, 15')

For the smaller sunny landscape, there are only a few truly hardy crapemyrtles, but they are worthwhile because of the extremely long summer bloom period. My three reliable favorites are:

- 'Velma's Royal Delight' (dark magenta, 6')
- 'Victor' (crimson red, 5')
- 'White Chocolate' (white, burgundy new growth, 6')

I once heard Lagerstroemias referred to as "60 mile an hour plants", because the summer flower show stands out when driving by at 60 MPH. The newer selections listed are all mildew resistant when planted in full sun. The taller selections are usually grown as limbed-up multistems. And if you are looking for deer-resistant multi-season interest plants, it's hard to beat Crapemyrtles.