Developing Crepe Myrtle Bonsai

By Randy Bennett

A fabulous example of a crepe myrtle bonsai

Crepe myrtle is great material to use for bonsai, particularly the dwarf and miniature varieties. However, you should know that the dwarf and in particular, the miniature varieties are slow growing when compared to the other types. This article will document the development of a crepe myrtle that began as field-grown stock. However, before getting into its development as

a bonsai, I think it important to share a little information about this wonderful species, as it is incredibly diverse and can therefore allow you as a bonsai artist to create a wide range of unique and interesting bonsai.

Categories of Crepe Myrtle

Crepe myrtles are incredibly popular as landscape material, especially in the South. There are many different varieties, ranging in size from small shrubs to small trees growing up to 30 or even 40 feet. There are even a few varieties of crepe myrtle that are grown as ground cover and only grows to a maximum height of 8-10 inches.

There are different categories of crepe myrtle based upon their mature growth height: ground cover (under 12 inches), miniature (1-5 feet), dwarf (6-10 feet), medium (14-18 feet) and standard (20-30 feet). It should be noted that there are weeping varieties among the miniature and dwarf categories.

Within the various height categories, there are well over 75 cultivars having a wide range of flower color. Colors include multiple shades of pink and red, white, purple, lavender, coral, peach and various picotee types, which means that the flowers are bi-color. They typically bloom in early summer and will often bloom a second time in late summer. The flowers, which look like crinkled crepe paper, form on panicles which are quite small on the miniature types and even among some of the dwarf cultivars. However, the panicles can be several feet long on the medium and especially the standard varieties.

Queen's Lace	Raspberry Sundae	Peppermint
Red or pink with white edges	Red centers with pink edges	Solid red and solid pink flowers

The above photos are examples of picotee type crepe myrtle flowers.

Species of Crepe Myrtle

Most varieties belong to the ***Lagerstroemia indica*** species. The indica crepe myrtle is native to China, but there are other species as well. The indica varieties tolerate heat, humidity and drought. It will also tolerate moist soils as long as they drain well. Their range is from zone 7 to zone 9.

However, Queen's Crepe Myrtle, which is an entirely different species of crepe myrtle (***L. speciosa***), is more tropical and ranges from zone 9 to zone 12. This species grows 25-30 feet tall and has large leaves, which are typically 8-12 inches long and 4 inches across. It also has large purple flowers. Each individual flower on the panicles measures 3 inches across!

In addition to ***L. indica and L speciosa***, there is a third species of crepe myrtle which is native to Japan, ***L. fauriei.*** This species grows 25-30 feet tall and wide. It bears white flowers and because of its resistance to mildew, has been a source for generating mildew resistant strains among some of the indica cultivars.

All crepe myrtles have a smooth, exfoliating bark, which creates a mottled appearance. Some of the varieties reveal a dark cinnamon inner bark which is quite striking in appearance. Most of the varieties form multiple trunks, especially the medium, dwarf and miniature varieties. The standard crepe myrtles tend to be more tree-like.

One of the characteristics of crepe myrtles that is more unique, especially in the deep South, is their tendency to have fall color. In zone 9 we seldom see trees with fall color, but the crepe myrtle is a notable exception. Leaves can be yellow, orange and even a deep red.

Pests and Diseases Common to Crepe Myrtles

As soon as your crepe myrtle leafs out, spray for aphids. They will be found on the underside of the leaves. The crepe myrtle aphids are a pale yellowish-green and are only about $1/16^{th}$ to $1/8^{th}$ of an inch long. They suck the liquids from the leaves and excrete a sugary substance that causes sooty mold. This covers the leaves, as well as the bark, making them look black and unattractive. A serious infestation will eventually turn leaves yellow and may hinder blooming.

Control these pests by spraying with insecticides that target aphids (such as malathion, diazinon, or ultra-fine horticultural oil) as soon as they appear. Spray both sides of the foliage thoroughly and be sure to get the tips of new shoots and flower buds. Repeat this treatment as necessary.

A white powdery fungus called powdery mildew sometimes attacks the leaves of many older varieties of crepe myrtles. Although the disease may keep the trees from blooming when it becomes severe, most trees are not permanently damaged.

If your tree begins to show signs of powdery mildew, spray the foliage at first sign of disease with Funginex, Immunox, or summer horticultural oil. These products will keep the powdery mildew from spreading; repeat sprays are necessary.

Developing a Crepe Myrtle Bonsai from Field-Grown Stock

The crepe myrtle pictured below was donated to the Greater New Orleans Bonsai Society's Annual Auction in August of 2018. I was the high bid at $75. The tree was growing in a plastic mortar tub, and I left the tree in that container since it was a good size for a field-grown tree of that size. I let the tree grow freely during 2019 to make sure it was strong and healthy.

The photos below show the tree in January 2020, when the tree was in dormancy. At that time, a few measurements were taken. The nebari measured 12 inches across and the diameter of the trunk above the flared base was 5 inches.

JANUARY 2020

Front of the tree

Left side of the tree

Back of the tree

Right side of the tree

The first thing to do in any styling is to decide what must go and get rid of it. Clearly, the lowest branch stump that was on the back of the tree was the first element not needed in any design.

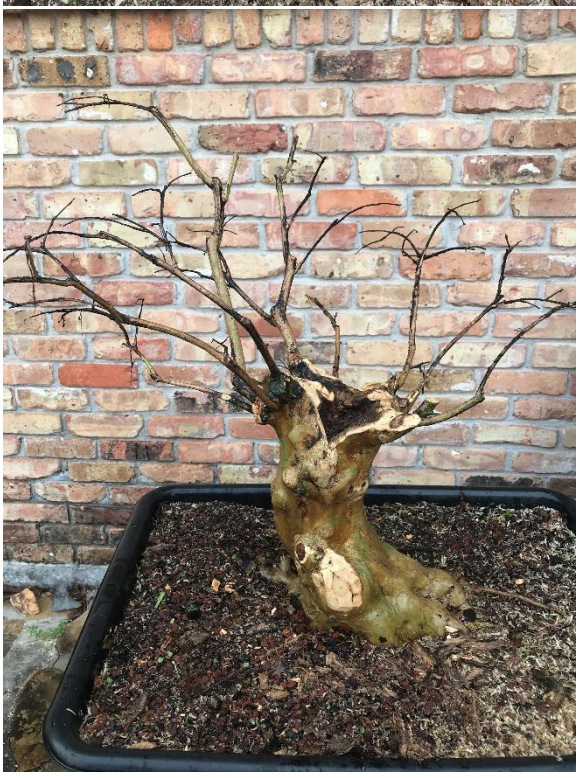
It would be removed. The next decision to make regarded the design of the tree. There were two basic options: use the large central leader to create a single, main trunk line and create a traditional informal upright bonsai design or remove the large leader and create a broom style.

The decision was made to create a broom style design. This is also a more natural growth pattern of crepe myrtles. That design meant removing several large sections of the tree. The easiest way to do that was to use power tools. An angle-grinder was chosen with a Lance-O-Lot cutting disc attached.

Large branch on the back of the tree

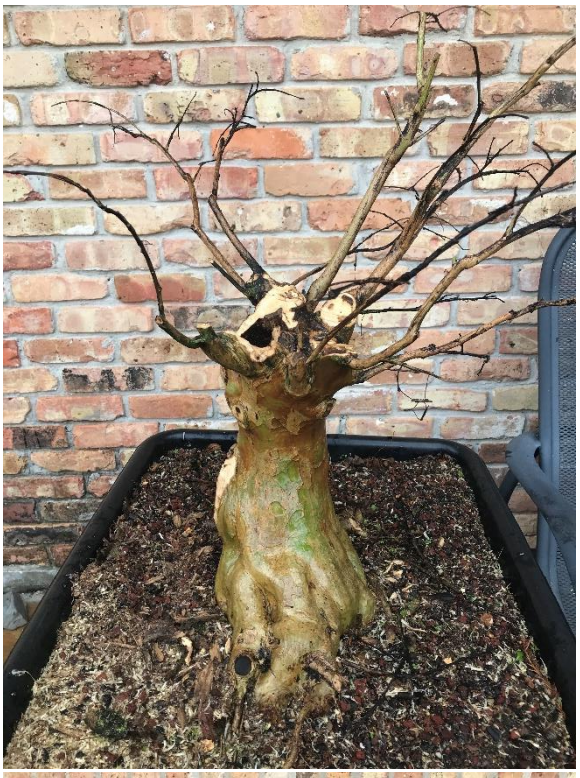
After removal using the angle-grinder

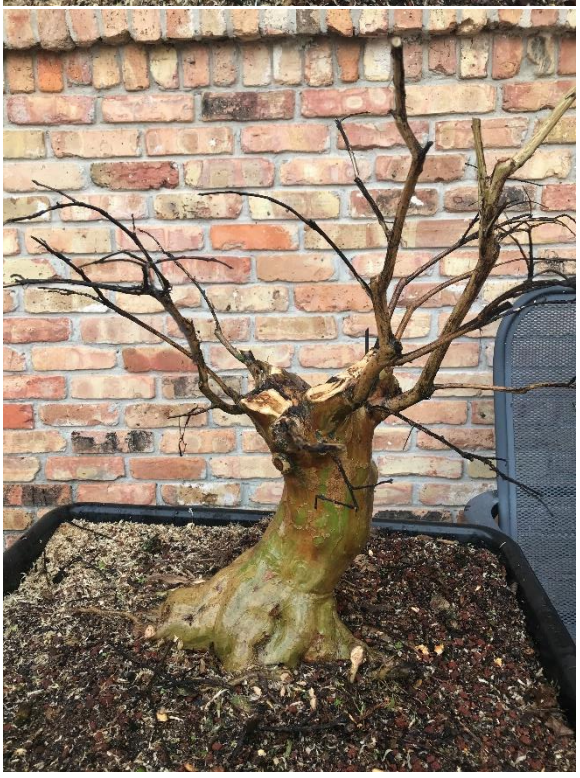
The Lance-O-Lot cutting disc is a chainsaw blade attached to a 4 ½" disc. It is designed for fast, rough, wood removal and not designed for fine work. After all the rough cuts were finished using the angle-grinder, a Dremel tool with a sanding drum was used to sand all the cuts smooth. All the cuts were then sealed with cut-paste.



After romoving all unwanted material

Back of the tree





Left side of the tree

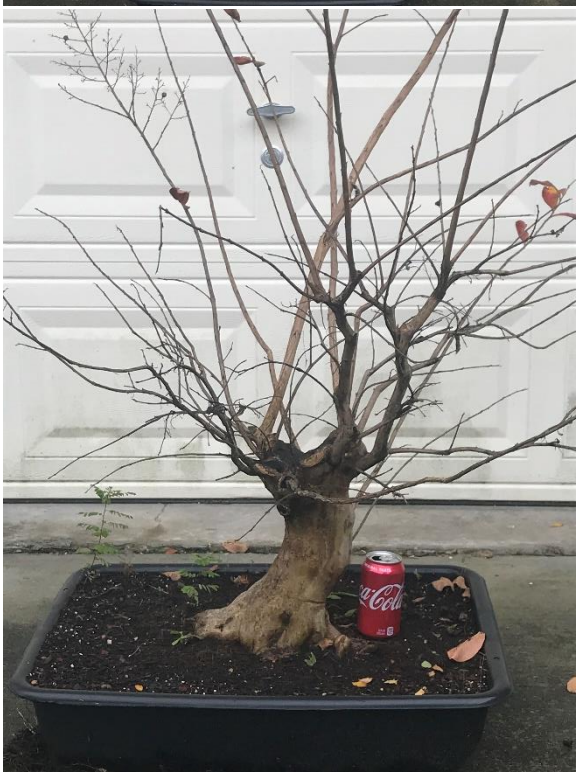
Front of the tree

Right side of the tree

While the remaining branches were trimmed, they were still left long. There was a lot of material removed from the tree, creating some exceptionally large wounds. It was felt that by leaving the branches long, significantly more buds were available to sprout along the shoots in the spring, thereby enabling the development of a greater amount of callous tissue, resulting in faster healing.

During the growing season of 2020, the branches were allowed to grow freely to promote healing. The tree was fertilized with Osmocote and sprayed for aphids and powdery mildew.

JANUARY 2021



You can see from the photos above the amount of growth that was achieved. Some of the shoots grew over 5 feet. At this time, the heaviest branches were pruned back by about three quarters so that when the tree leafed out in the spring, growth would be more evenly

distributed among all the branches. I was not ready to make any other hard cuts at this time to give the tree more time to callous over the large cuts that were previously made.

The tree leafed out in February and fertilization began in March with Osmocote. Applications of malathion were applied twice to get rid of aphids. The tree was pruned heavily in late May of 2021. This is a great time to prune most deciduous trees – especially those that are vigorous growers. By mid-May, the spring growth has had a chance to replenish the food stores used to generate new growth and pruning heavily at that time would allow for substantial new growth to occur with plenty of time for that growth to harden off before the hot summers start to shut down growth.

MAY 2021

May 2021 – Back of the tree

May 2021 – Left side of the tree

May 2021 – Right side of the tree

May 2021 – Front of the tree

It is fairly easy to identify dormant buds on 2–3-year-old wood on crepe myrtles and a simple task to locate them on current growth. Each of the older branches along with the new,

vigorous branches were examined and cut back to two buds. There were a few where three buds were left to achieve new growth in the desired direction. There were several weak, spindly shoots that sprouted recently and were left untouched. Some of these are in better positions than older, existing branches and may be used to replace those older branches if they can show gains in vigor. Otherwise, they will be removed in the fall.

June 19, 2021 – one month later

The longest shoots have grown 30 inches in the past month!

Next Steps

The tree will be allowed to grow freely for the rest of the growing season. No more fertilizer will be applied during this growth season since the goal now is to transition over to healthy, but less vigorous growth and shorter internodes. In late January 2022, after the tree is in dormancy, each of the new shoots will be pruned to two or three buds, depending on the position of the second bud.

Following the pruning in late January, the tree will be repotted, since it has been in the 27" x 20" x 6" deep mortar tub for several years and roots are growing out of the bottom of the container. It will be repotted into a 24" x 17" x 5" deep mica pot. The mica pot will serve as its new training pot for two to three more years while branch development and twigging are carried out.

In March 2022, when new growth has begun to harden off, the tree will begin receiving organic fertilizers which will maintain good health but not allow 5 feet of growth. It may or may not receive another hard pruning back in late May of 2022, depending on the vigor after repotting. For most trees, it is not a good idea to conduct hard pruning and repotting in the same year. However, it can be done if the tree puts on a lot of growth and the pruning is done judiciously.

This variety of crepe myrtle is very vigorous, so if there is at least 18 to 24 inches of growth on most of the shoots by May 15, then all the shoots will be pruned back to 2 or 3 leaves in May 2022. If there is 18 to 24 inches on just a few shoots, then the terminal growth at the end of those shoots will be pinched out and the remaining shoots will be left untouched. This will help balance the vigor among all the shoots. If most of the shoots are between 12 and 18 inches, then those shoots will have the growth tips pinched out but will not be pruned back until January 2023. Pinching out the terminal buds on shoots 12 to 18 inches will slow the elongation of those shoots and encourage back-budding.

I will provide an update on this tree in January 2022, so you can follow the trees' development and get a better grasp on the strategies and development techniques that should be applied. The key concepts that I would like you to come away with when developing a bonsai from collected or field-grown stock are:

1. Transplant material into oversize containers that are longer and wider than they are deep. Do not be in a hurry to plant trees into a bonsai container. You slow down the trees development by years when you do so.
2. Make sure the tree has fully recovered after being root pruned and transplanted. This may take several years depending on the species and its overall health.
3. Once the tree has fully recovered, is healthy, and roots have filled the container, make your design plan.
4. Make the cuts and any carving required before the tree leafs out and do not repot.
5. Only prune twice a year – late January and again in mid-May – each time pruning back to 2 or 3 buds or leaves.
6. If you are dealing with a weak variety, such as a miniature or dwarf, you should only prune once a year – in late January.
7. Do not think about repotting until you have developed significant branching – at least primary and secondary, along with at least some tertiary development.
8. Repot into a slightly smaller and shallower container after about three years.
9. Switch to an organic fertilizer after the repot.

10. When the tree is fully developed, then and only then should you start your search for a suitable bonsai container.