# **Tonto Crape Myrtle Care Guide**

“Tonto” Crape Myrtles are a popular choice for gardeners and landscaping enthusiasts looking for a hardy, easy-to-maintain tree species that has attractive ornamental features.

Mature Tonto Crape myrtles provide your outdoor space with an appealing and natural addition that reveals a ‘hidden secret’ every summer. The trees, which have a medium size, can withstand neglect and drought-like conditions with minimal adverse effects on plant health.

## **Lagerstroemia 'Tonto' Crape Myrtle Profile**

Below is a summary and a brief commentary of the plant's profile.

| **Names** | Lagerstroemia, Tonto, Crape Myrtle |
| --- | --- |
| **Size** | 8'-15' Height, 6’-10’ Spread |
| **Soil type** | Chalk, Clay, Loam, Sand |
| **Soil pH** | 5-7 |
| **Water** | Moderate |
| **Sun exposure** | Full |
| **USDA Zones** | 6-9 |
| **Bloom time** | Summer |
| **Flower color** | Red-Pink |
| **When to prune** | Winter |
| **Root system (type)** | Fibrous |

### **Origin and names**

**The Tonto Crape Myrtle is a subspecies of the more popular crape myrtle native to parts of Eastern Asia including countries such as China, Korea, Japan, India, and parts of Oceania. Its botanical name is *Lagerstroemia indica “Tonto,”* but it also shares names such as crape myrtle, tonto, crepe flower, etc.**

The species is naturalized across different continents and regions with conditions similar to its native environment. US residents find the plants a welcome addition to their gardens, patio, and hedges considering their appealing look and minimal care requirements.

### **Size**

Tonto crape myrtles are smaller than other crape myrtle varieties. **Mature trees reach an average height of 8’-15’ and a spread of 6’- 10’ depending on the prevailing growth conditions.**

The plant produces flowers that appear in large clusters averaging 6 inches in length. Its foliage features a simple leaf design, smooth margin, and an average 2-6 inches leaf size.

### **Blooms and foliage**

Tonto crape myrtles produce attractive blooms every summer. The blooming season lasts 8-12 weeks, after which the flowers fall off. **Tonto crape myrtles have a red-pink hue, but the shade may vary depending on the tree’s variety.**

**The plant also consists of dark-green foliage** organized in an alternate pattern**.** Leaf color changes to yellow or red during the fall months. New foliage appears during the spring when external conditions favor active growth.

### **Growth rate**

**The plant has a moderate growth rate averaging 13”-24” per year**. Crape myrtle growth rate largely depends on prevailing environmental conditions, adherence to the plant’s light requirements, soil type, pruning, etc.

**Young plants reach maturity in 5-10 years**. Most of the growth occurs during the plant's active phase (Mid-spring to early Autumn). You can add fertilizer to help promote new foliage growth, blooms, strong stems, etc.

It's crucial to ensure you don’t overdo your fertilizer use as too much nitrogen-rich fertilizer application can cause excessive foliage growth and lackluster bloom quality.

## **How to grow and care for Tonto crape myrtle**

Tonto crape myrtles are hardy plants that can tolerate diverse conditions. The trees are drought and deer resistant and highly adaptable for urban and suburban needs.

Young plants require more care and attention compared to juvenile and mature trees. It’s vital to ensure your plants have adequate access to light during their active growing season.

You might also have to check the soil pH, adhere to the plant watering needs and prune excessive growth to maintain your plant’s health.

### **Spacing when planting**

Spacing for your “Tonto” crape myrtles depends on the gardener's intent. You can grow the trees as individual shrubs or as a cluster of plants to create a natural fence.

**Space individual Tonto crape myrtles 10’ apart and 6’-8’ when planting in a group.** You might also consider planting your tree on an open surface free from structures that may inhibit or alter the plant’s growth pattern and access to light or humidity.

Always ensure that you leave a 10’ space between your tree and any building, roof, or structure to avoid future problems and ensure your tree remains healthy.

### **Light**

Tonto crape myrtles have specific light requirements. **The trees need at least 6 hours of direct sunlight during their active growing season to produce new foliage and flowers.**

Crape myrtles prefer growing under full sun conditions but can tolerate growing under the partial sun though they might experience a slower growth rate than the latter. Inadequate sun exposure can negatively affect plant health, reduce growth rate, and affect the production of new blooms.

### **Soil type and pH**

Adherence to a plant’s soil and pH requirements positively affects its health, growth rate, etc. **“Tonto” crape myrtles can grow in chalk, sand, loam, and clay soil types but prefer growing in well-draining soils.**

**The plants also prefer acidic soils with a pH averaging 5.0-7.0**. Clay soils have a high water retention ability that may leave your plant vulnerable to overwatering (and the implications of the same).

You can adjust your soil’s pH by using lime (and other compounds) to increase alkalinity and peat moss to make your soil more acidic. Ideally, you can also take a sample to the lab for testing and more clarification.

Some fertilizer types can also alter your soil’s pH. It’s advisable to use minimal amounts of balanced, natural, slow-release fertilizers when you feel the need to improve your soil’s nutrient quality.

### **Water**

Tonto crape myrtles can withstand extensive durations without the need for additional water. The plant’s watering requirements depend on prevailing conditions, soil type, and growth stage.

**Young Tonto crape myrtles have more demanding water needs and require water 2-3 times a week for the first three months before they fully establish themselves in the soil. Mature/well-established trees have less demanding water needs and require water at least 2-3 times a month.**

Only water established trees after 2-3 inches of the top soil becomes dry. You can also add mulch to prevent excessive water loss and keep the soil moist.

### **USDA hardiness zones**

**“Tonto” crape myrtles grow best in USDA hardiness zones 7-9.**

You can find such conditions in the southern US states such as Florida, California, etc.

Plants growing under such conditions experience milder winters, longer light durations during Summer and Spring, more heat exposure, and sporadic rainfall in some parts. Remember to check whether your plant can survive in your current USDA hardiness before choosing whether to propagate.

### **Pruning**

Tonto crape myrtles require regular pruning to maintain an upright appearance.

The species grows as multi-stemmed branches emerging from the main stem, which can cause your tree to appear unkept and have an uneven growth pattern.

**Prune your Tonto crape myrtles during winter or early spring before it forms new growth**. Regularly pruning your trees improves your plant’s health, helps eradicate bugs and diseases, supports new growth, and ensures sufficient light reaches its core.

You can use sharp pruning scissors to remove weak branches. Make a diagonal cut about ½ inches from a bud away from the central stem. Take care not to over-prune your plant as over-pruned plants take time to recover and may be susceptible to diseases.

**REFERENCES**

* [FPS-329/FP329: Lagerstroemia x 'Tonto' Tonto Crape Myrtle](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FP329)
* [USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map](https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/)
* [How Do I Prune Crape Myrtle? | North Carolina Cooperative Extension](https://pender.ces.ncsu.edu/2022/02/how-do-i-prune-crape-myrtle/)
* [Missouri Botanical Garden](https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?taxonid=249378&isprofile=0&)

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