

## A Plant of the South For New Jersey

August 15 marked my one-year anniversary as the Director of the Rutgers Gardens. In recognition of this anniversary, I decided a field trip to Virginia and North Carolina was in order to explore other arboreta and their methods of operations. At one of the destinations, JC Ralston Arboretum - at NC State, I had the fortune to talk to the Arboretum Director Dennis Werner. His lament matched mine; what has happened to all the interesting plants? Most residential gardens are home to the common Yew, Holly, and Juniper. But, what happened to all those really great plants that bring interest through bark, foliage, flower or form to the garden? They are missing! While walking about the arboretum (a great destination I might add), we came across several of these 'missing plants' including Crape Myrtles. Three specimen of great interest were *Lagerstroemia fauriei* 'Townhouse' and 'Fantasy', and a cross of *L. indica* and *L. fauriei* named 'Natchez'

Crape Myrtles are a fun group of plants. They derive their name from the crinkled crape paper like quality of the flowers, with colors of white, pink or purple. They are a common sight throughout the South (even along highways), but are seen less frequent north of Washington DC. Let it be known, there is many a good cultivar appropriate for central NJ! *Lagerstroemia fauriei* 'Townhouse' and 'Fantasy' were seedlings brought back from Japan by Dr. John Creech of the National Arboretum in the 1950's. They have proven reliably hardy to zone 6 and at NC State have grown into tall specimens that will induce a feeling of true awe. Both of these plants have fragrant white flower trusses of 3-4" that appear in mid July. Unlike many of the hybrids, they do not have reblooming characteristics. The blossoms however do persist for three weeks and cover the ground with delicate parade-like white confetti of spent petals. Plus, they have the bonus of great cinnamon colored bark. Fantasy has smooth textured trunks, is more upright in habit, and grows to 50 feet, while Townhouse is shorter (to 35') with more tan coloration and a pronounced muscular sinuousness to the trunks (Arnold Schwarzenegger take note). Could you ask for more?

*Lagerstroemia* 'Natchez' grows to 20-25' in height and has large white flower trusses to 12" in length. Hardy in central NJ, it has an attractive exfoliating cinnamon colored bark, with a contrasting light brown underbark. At Sandhill's Community College in NC, this cultivar was planted in an Allee with great effect. In addition to all of this, it is blessed with great orange, yellow and red autumn leaf coloration!

Although they are denizens of the South, they will grow happily in Central NJ. Provide a site with full sun, and moist but well drained soils. Once established, they are drought tolerant. Pruning should be kept to the removal of crossing or rubbing branches. It has been documented that fall and winter removal of the branch tips will result in not just an ugly plant, but dieback to the ground, or outright death. I can attest to this personally!

This is a great plant for a number of uses it provides in the garden. It can be a focal point (great bark, flower and form), a massing shrub (as witnessed along many a highway throughout the South), or it can be used as a cutback shrub. Throughout northern NJ, the

plant is not totally bud hardy. But, it is root hardy, and the plants can be cut back to 6-12" in height each year, producing an ideal candidate for the back of the summer mixed border.

For the effect of a summer flowering shrub, a small tree of elegance, or a cut back for the mixed border, this 'missing plant' is a suitable choice for many gardens throughout NJ. Sometimes you just need to leave home to find what is missing!