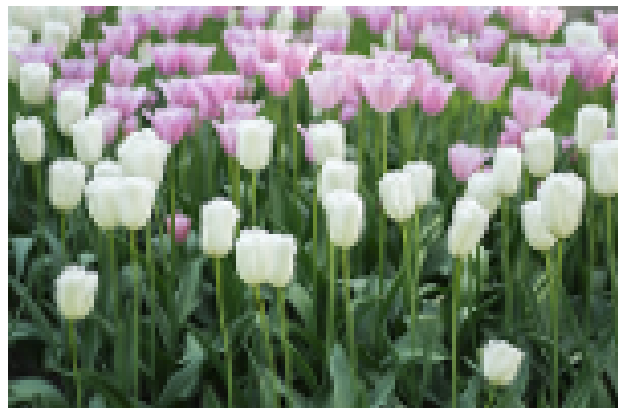




ROBESON COUNTY

# THE CAROLINA SANDHILLS GARDENER



## IMPORTANT INFORMATION >>>

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1.....Important Information
- 2.....Plant Spotlight - Crape Myrtle
- 3.....Consider Edible Landscapes
- 4.....Pest Alert: Large Patch
- 5.....Awakening from Winter's Nap
- 6-7.....Planting First Year Peach Trees

### TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOIL TESTING

Soil testing is a service provided by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) at their Agronomic Division in Raleigh that will assess the present levels of major plant nutrients, soil pH, and micronutrients. You can pick up free kits at your local Extension Center. Samples are currently \$4 per sample through March 31, 2026. For more info, visit <https://www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/>

If you are interested in learning more about any information in this newsletter, contact the Extension Center at 910-671-3276 or visit our website at [robeson.ces.ncsu.edu](http://robeson.ces.ncsu.edu). For accommodations for persons with disabilities, contact Cooperative Extension no later than ten (10) business days before the event.

Mack Johnson  
Extension Agent

Agriculture - Horticulture

Email: [Mack\\_Johnson@ncsu.edu](mailto:Mack_Johnson@ncsu.edu)

### UPCOMING EVENTS

ROBESON COUNTY FARMERS MARKET:  
OPENS SATURDAY, MAY 9, 2026  
THURSDAYS 4:00 P.M. – 7:00 P.M.  
SATURDAYS 8:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.  
LOCATED 3RD AND WATER STREET

FLOCK SWAP – MAY 16

SEED LIBRARY  
LOCATED AT THE FAIRMONT LIBRARY  
105 SOUTH MAIN STREET  
FAIRMONT, NC 28340

PESTICIDES CLASSES 2026 REGISTER AT:  
[GO.NCSU.EDU/PESTRECERT](http://GO.NCSU.EDU/PESTRECERT)

BUILDING A STRONGER CATTLE INDUSTRY IN OUR COUNTY  
CLICK [BUILDING STRONGER CATTLE](#) TO REGISTER

REGIONAL HIGH-TUNNEL WORKSHOP  
APRIL 7, 2026, 9:30 A.M. – 3:00 P.M.  
POWELL-MELVIN SERVICE CENTER  
450 SMITH CIRCLE  
ELIZABETHTOWN, NORTH CAROLINA  
TO REGISTER CLICK: [REGIONAL HIGH TUNNEL WORKSHOP](#)



N.C. COOPERATIVE EXTENSION  
ROBESON COUNTY CENTER  
O. P. OWENS AGRICULTURE CENTER  
P. O. BOX 2280  
455 CATON ROAD  
LUMBERTON, NC 28359

PHONE - 910-671-3276  
FAX - 910-671-6278  
WEBSITE - [ROBESON.CES.NCSU.EDU](http://ROBESON.CES.NCSU.EDU)

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# PLANT SPOTLIGHT: CRAPE MYRTLE - 'LAGERSTROEMIA'

2



## ALLISON WEATHERSPOON

Horticulture Agent, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Bladen County



Flowers. Photo Cathy Dewitt

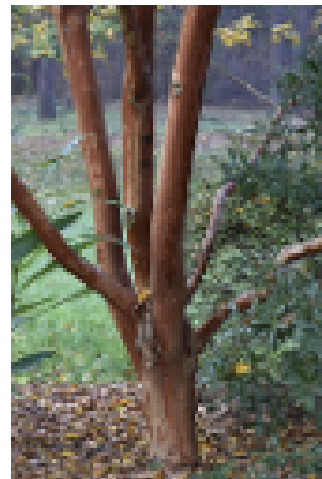
One of North Carolina's favorite landscaping trees is none other than 'lagerstroemia', commonly known as the crape myrtle (sometimes spelled crepe). The name covers 49 species of small trees and shrubs in the loosestrife family. Originally from Asia, the crape myrtle was introduced to the United States in 1790 by the French botanist Andre Michaux. Since then, several varieties of this small tree have since been developed in North Carolina by J.C. Raulston at the North Carolina State University Arboretum (currently J.C. Raulston Arboretum). The most common cultivars available now are hybrids between the common crape myrtle and the Japanese crape myrtle.

The showy blooms that arrive in mid-spring and last through the summer add a pop of color to landscapes across the state. The wide variety of colorful blooms – including pink, purple, white, and red – is part of what makes the crape myrtle such a popular choice for homeowners and commercial landscapers. The common name, “crepe”, refers to the unique crinkly texture of the blossoms that resemble crepe paper. Aside from blooms, crape myrtles can also be found in a wide range of sizes, from 3' to >30'. Their exfoliating bark and multi-trunks are a unique addition that provide aesthetic appeal

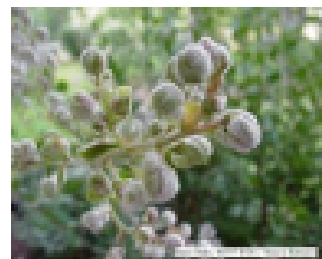
These versatile plants thrive in full sun and well-drained soils that are slightly acidic. They enjoy the warm climate of southern states – but mulching in the winter is never a bad idea. They are generally tough and cold-hardy, making them a low-maintenance option for home landscaping. When pruning is necessary, try to avoid ‘crape murder’ by thinning branches rather than lopping off the top of the canopy. Hard pruning can lead to structural issues as the tree grows new branches and may affect the amount of flowers the plant produces. Try to have all of your pruning completed by late summer.

For the most part, crape myrtles are trouble-free plants, but there are a few diseases and pests that can affect the overall health if not treated. Powdery mildew is the most common issue you may run into with your crape myrtles. If you are starting with a sapling, you can be proactive against powdery mildew by ensuring you choose a full-sun location for planting, as well as, choosing a variety (such as ‘Appalachee’ or ‘Fantasy’) that is completely resistant to the disease. If you have a mature tree, be proactive with removing any new shoots growing at the base of the tree, as they are most susceptible to contracting powdery mildew and spreading it to the rest of the plant. Crape myrtle aphids are an insect pest that can infest the crape myrtle. Luckily, there are many natural predators to the aphid, such as ladybugs and parasitic wasps, but if you are able to catch the insects in action, spraying them with a strong stream of water can be an easy, but effective method of control. A new insect pest - crape myrtle bark scale - can also cause issues

Whether you are looking for a colorful addition for your landscape or a hardy tree that can withstand the summer heat of Southeastern North Carolina, the crape myrtle remains an excellent choice. By selecting disease and pest-resistant varieties, as well as being mindful with your pruning, these “Lilacs of the South” can survive for decades. It's no question the crape myrtle will continue to reign as a top landscaping favorite for our area.



Bark. Photo Cathy Dewitt



Powdery Mildew



Aphids

For more information about crape myrtles, please visit: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/lagerstroemia/>.

# CONSIDER EDIBLE LANDSCAPES

**MACK JOHNSON**

Horticulture Agent, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Robeson County



3

With spring coming soon, home gardeners have a great opportunity to weave edible landscaping into their existing yards. Edible landscaping is a concept of blending food-producing plants within our ornamental landscapes. Here we are using vegetables, herbs, fruit trees, berries, and even edible flowers to fulfill the desired function of many of our ornamentals that we use in our landscape. We can use edibles to form hedges, add seasonal color, and support pollinators and wildlife with food and habitat.

Most edibles will need 6-8 hours of direct sunlight. If you have shadier areas in your existing borders and beds then leafy greens and some herbs will perform better in those areas. Optimum soil health is vital to successful gardening, so don't forget to soil test for a good gauge on existing soil pH and current nutrient levels. Amending the soil with organic matter is always a win for the plants, especially in our sandy soils. Edibles may need scouting more often than your ornamentals to manage any pests or disease before it becomes problematic. Hopefully the edible landscaping is included in mulched areas; if not, don't forget that 3 inches of mulch aids with weed and moisture control, along with soil temperature moderation. Can't forget the water – most food producing plants need at least 1 inch of water per week. Drip tape and soaker hoses are more efficient and will promote healthier foliage versus overhead watering that wets the foliage and encourages disease.

You may want to start with small steps before you add larger structural changes. Keep in mind what your future possibilities are, such as a large space requirement or "specimens" that may include fruit trees like peach, apple, pear or even a fig. It's relatively easy to include smaller plants. Through March is a great time to add kale, spinach, lettuce, beets, cabbage, collards, carrots, broccoli, potatoes, radishes, and turnips. These can be directly seeded, but for sake of approaching warm weather, you may choose to use transplants for cabbage, collards, and broccoli.

Adding floral beauties to the edible landscape includes violas, pansies, Nasturtiums, and daylilies.

Think like a landscape designer as you plan your edible landscape. Think layering as you place taller plants in back with the shortest at the front. Planting in groups or drifts present a more pleasing and cohesive display. Remember gardening is not a chore but a joy. Have fun as you plan(t) to include a more sustainable landscape in your future. For more information on edible landscaping and appropriate plant selection, reach out to your county Extension Center.



# PEST ALERT: LARGE PATCH DISEASE

ALLEN WEST

Horticulture Agent, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Cumberland County

4



With the arrival of March, it's easy to notice the days are getting longer. It won't be long before the soil temperatures get warmer and the lawns will at last start to get greener. Though the winter brings a welcome break from the weekly chore of mowing my lawn, this time of year I start getting anxious to see my centipede lawn turn from its dry crusty brown of winter to a lush green.

It is during this time of lawn transition I get calls from clients who notice issues with their warm-season grasses. Most of the time the issues are abiotic reasons (meaning not a disease or insect), such as simply too much shade, winter kill, or foot traffic. With that said, there are some fungal diseases that show up in the Sandhills of North Carolina in the early spring. One of the most common ones seen in home lawns is called large patch.

Large patch is a fungal disease that most often affects centipede, zoysia, and St. Augustine grasses. Though bermuda lawns can have this disease, when healthy, they can outgrow it and even go unnoticed. Since many of our readers in our part of North Carolina have these grasses in your home lawn, this is something to keep an eye out for.

Rhizoctonia spp., the pathogen that causes large patch disease, thrives more as the soil cools in the fall and as it warms up in the spring. Symptoms of large patch may not even be noticed until the spring lawn greens up. Large, roughly-shaped circular patches that start at sizes of 2-3 feet in diameter appear. These circular areas can be yellow, tan, or reddish brown in color. If left untreated and with favorable conditions, these patches can grow 8-10 feet or more if patches start to grow into each other.

To help reduce the chances of your lawn contracting large patch in centipede, zoysia and St. Augustine lawns, do not apply nitrogen fertilizers after August, nor apply nitrogen in the spring until a few weeks after your lawn has completely greened up (usually mid-May.)

It is important that you mow the lawn at the recommended height for your type of grass. Also, only irrigate your lawns when the soils are dry, as over watering and saturation can increase the chances of large patch.



Matthew Zidek, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Bugwood.org

If you suspect you have large patch disease, contact your local Extension Horticulture Agent to find out the best methods to ensure an accurate diagnosis. As was mentioned earlier, most brown or bare spots are not caused by a pathogen. However, if it is determined you do have this fungal disease, then you will likely have to apply fungicides to eradicate it from your lawn. Properly timed, fungicide applications in the fall are the most effective way of controlling large patch disease. Follow-up spring applications may be necessary as well. Contact your local Extension Horticulture Agent for recommendations on proper fungicide applications.

Understanding what to look out for when it comes to large patch disease can add one more tool in your lawn care bag of knowledge. Hang in there gardeners, the warm weather is coming and the grass will be greener on the other side of winter.

## ASHLEY GRUBB

Area Horticulture Agent, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Hoke and Scotland Counties



Spring is arriving, and while the air outside might still have a bite, the Sandhills are waking up. If you are looking forward to seeing your garden grow this year, now is the time to put in the work.

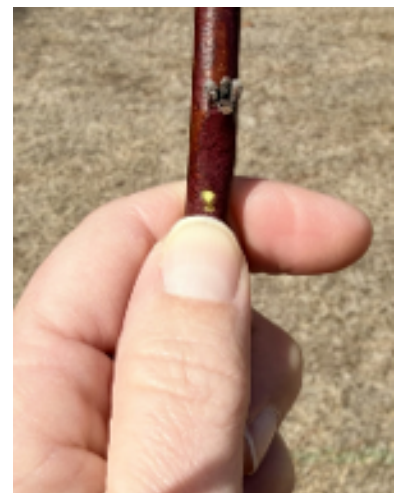
I had a conversation with a fellow agent about something a grower said last month that really struck me. We were talking about our love of gardening and how it can transcend being just a hobby and become something that is part of our life's work. We chart the seasons and weather, plan and plant. We keep records and collect our favorite plants and then save seeds and try to master creating beautiful life and landscapes from the smallest beginnings in our spaces. We have successes and failures, and with each new year, hope springs eternal.

What separates us gardeners from other master craftsmen – and what the grower said that really made me stop and think – was that artists, blacksmiths, and chefs have hundreds or even thousands of opportunities to perfect their craft. Gardeners, if we're lucky, get maybe 50 springs to achieve some sort of mastery. This can be intimidating, but also maybe an excuse for all of our recent seed-catalog purchases over the last few weeks (at least that's what I'll try to tell my husband, haha). I'm going to choose to embrace that perspective as inspiration to try something new each year, but also embrace the practices and perennials that have already been established. With such limited trial time, there's no reason to reinvent the wheel each year

Leaning on perennials as the foundation to a beautiful land scape sounds like a great plan to me!

This winter we have had quite a bit of cold weather, so I want to remind you that some of your perennial plants might take a little longer to return, but don't give up on them! As spring arrives it is okay to cut back dead and dried old-growth. Don't feel like you have to pull up the whole plant though, if it's something that will generally come back. After you clean up your garden beds, wait and watch and you may be surprised! Also, if you have a shrub or tree that you can't decide if it is dead or not, try the fingernail test. Take your fingernail and use it to lightly scratch the stem or branches. If the top layer of bark pulls back to reveal green underneath, your plant is alive and just dormant! It should come back soon. If you find brown underneath, that part might be dead. Continue scratching lower and lower on the plant until you find some green and you can cut back to that point. If you don't find any green, just remember sometimes plants will return from the roots! Patience is a difficult skill to have, especially in the spring

I hope that as this new season progresses, you and I can remember to view each spring as a gift and a chance to create something new and beautiful - to work on becoming masters of our gardens



# PLANTING AND MAINTAINING FIRST YEAR PEACH TREES

BRUCE MCLEAN

Area Horticulture Agent, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Columbus County

6



Peaches (*Prunus persica*) are a popular fruit crop throughout the southeast, offering high yields when properly established. Successful planting and pruning in the first year promotes strong root development, balanced structure, disease resistance and management. With a little effort, you can grow your own peach trees that will bring forth a bountiful harvest of the delicious summertime fruit.

**Site Selection and Soil Preparation** – Select a planting site with full sun exposure, receiving at least 6-8 hours of direct sunlight daily to support photosynthesis and fruit ripening. Avoid shaded areas near tall structures, trees, or fences that could reduce light during the growing season. Steer clear of low-lying frost pockets, where cold air accumulates and increases the risk of spring frost damage to blossoms. Soil quality is critical for peach tree health. Peach trees thrive in well-drained, loamy soils with a pH of 6.0-6.5. Conduct a soil test and a nematode test prior to planting to identify nutrient deficiencies, pH imbalances, and/or nematode presence. Collect 15-20 samples (for both the soil and the nematode sample) from 8 inches deep across the site, mix them, and send the samples in to the NCDA Soil Lab for analysis. Based on results, apply lime to raise pH or other amendments as recommended. Having a site that is not compromised by compaction is important. If your site does have compaction issues, it may be beneficial to delay your planting a year, so as to give you time to correct your site with tillage and the addition of compost. Avoid waterlogged sites, as peach roots are susceptible to root rot pathogens like *Phytophthora*. Remember, choosing the correct site and correcting any problems will go a long way at providing your trees the best possible growing environment.

**Planting Techniques** – Plant bare-root peach trees during dormancy in late winter to early spring, allowing roots to establish before leaf-out. Container-grown trees can be planted year-round but are best in cooler months. Inspect roots upon receipt: for bare-root, prune damaged or excessively long roots; for container trees, score circling roots to encourage outward growth. Dig a hole twice the width of the root system and as deep as the roots, typically 18-24 inches wide. Use a shovel for small plantings or an auger for efficiency in larger orchards. Roughen the hole sides to prevent root girdling. Position the tree so the graft union (the bulge where scion meets rootstock) is 2-3 inches above the soil line to avoid crown rot. Spread roots over a small central mound of soil for support. Backfill with native soil, firming gently to eliminate air pockets without compacting. Do not add fertilizer directly in the hole to prevent root burn; instead, apply a light broadcast of balanced fertilizer (e.g., 10-10-10) several inches from the trunk after planting. Water thoroughly immediately after planting to settle soil and hydrate roots. Install drip irrigation for consistent moisture, providing 1-2 inches of water weekly during dry periods. As a protective measure, apply white latex paint to the lower 18 inches of the trunk to prevent sunscald and herbicide injury.

**Pruning in the First Year** – Prune immediately after planting to establish an open-center (vase-shaped) training system, which enhances light penetration, air circulation, and fruit quality while reducing disease pressure. Use sharp bypass pruners for clean cuts that heal rapidly. For branched trees: select 3-5 scaffold branches starting 18-24 inches aboveground, spaced evenly around the trunk with wide crotch angles (45-60 degrees) for strength. Remove competing branches and top the central leader above the highest scaffold. Head back each scaffold by one-quarter to one-third of its length, cutting above an outward-facing bud to promote lateral branching and stiffen limbs.

For unbranched whips: cut the trunk at 24-30 inches above ground (4-6 inches above desired scaffold height). This stimulates bud break. In the following dormant season, select scaffolds from lower shoots with strong angles, removing upright top growth prone to splitting. Any pruning (after the initial training/pruning) should be directed at removing any dead, damaged, diseased, or crossing branches. In late winter before bud swell, refine the structure by eliminating inward-growing shoots or water sprouts that crowd the center

**First-Year Maintenance** - Monitor soil moisture closely; young trees require consistent watering but not saturation. Applying a light layer of organic mulch (1-2" deep) around the base (extending to the drip line) helps to conserve water, suppress weeds, and moderate soil temperature. Be careful not to apply more mulch than this. Doing so can provide a safe habitat for voles, which can chew on the bark of trees, girdling and killing them. If you do apply mulch, keep the mulch 4-6 inches from the trunk to prevent rot.

Fertilize sparingly in spring with a nitrogen-based product, splitting applications if needed. Scout for pests such as aphids, peach tree borers, or fungal diseases. Use integrated pest management, applying controls only as necessary based on thresholds. Ideally, you would like to remove any fruit that sets in the first year. This will redirect energy to vegetative growth. By the end of the season, the tree should exhibit vigorous shoots and a balanced framework, setting the stage for future productivity. Following these practices minimizes establishment failures and maximizes long-term yields. Consult your local Extension office for region-specific adaptations, such as variety selection or chill hour requirements. With proper care, peach trees can produce fruit within 3 years and remain productive for 12-15 years.

