

CRAPEMYRTLE

Common Names: Crape or China berry

Botanical Name: *Lagerstroemia*

Family: *Lythraceae*

Crape myrtle or crapemyrtle may have been introduced by a Frenchman, Andre Michaux, and brought west on a Chinese cargo ship. It was named for Magnus von Lagerstrom, a benefactor to Uppsala University where Linnaeus taught. Lagerstrom brought Linnaeus a rhinoceros-horn cup from China that was carved with lizards, fruit and flowers. After Linnaeus died Sir James Smith bought many of his possessions including the cup and many of his papers. Swedes realized that these articles would be going to England and were very upset—one story says that the Swedish navy chased the boat carrying them to England. Though this may not be true there is an engraving showing the English ship out-sailing its Swedish pursuers. In 1970 the Linnaean Society returned the rhinoceros cup, but not the papers, to Sweden in honor of the king's eighty-eighth birthday.



Michaux who brought the trees west began studying botany after his wife died. Twice his adventures took him to Persia where he was robbed of all of his possessions and left without his shoes. His comment was that it is hard to “botanize” on the hot sand without shoes. In 1785 he was sent by the French government to America to collect American plants, especially trees that could help in reforestation. He and his fifteen-year-old son Francois he set up nursery gardens in New York and Charleston to house his American collections. Some of his plants included the Lombardy poplar and the ginkgo. Michaux and his son stayed ten years, exploring from Canada to Florida. Two plants are named in their honor: a water primrose, *michauxiana* and an oak *michauxii*. Michaux sent thousands of trees to Versailles, though many did not survive the voyage home. He almost died in 1796 when he was returning to France when his ship was wrecked off the Holland coast. Though washed ashore, unconscious and lashed to a spar, he survived along with his collection of dried plants. After all of his years of service, the revolutionary government refused to pay the salary he was owed. He died of fever in Madagascar.

Crapemyrtles are sometimes called China berries since their berries were useful—especially in making rosaries. They are called “crape” from the Latin *crispus* (curled) because of the curled blossoms. Often planted near stables because they were thought to keep flies away. Lucky horses!

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names

by *Diana Wells*