

Crepe Myrtle

Lagerstroemia indica

These glorious summer flowering shrubs are at their best right now in Sydney gardens, showing off their dense clusters of flowers which can be white, mauve, pink, red, crimson or purple. Close up, the flowers are crimped and delicate, comprising 6 petals attached with a long, narrow claw.

Lagerstroemia indica is a native of China, Korea and Japan and also the Indian subcontinent (hence the specific name *indica*), and it can grow as a single stemmed small tree with unusual, but very attractive mottled bark, or as a multi-stemmed shrub. The genus *Lagerstroemia* can be found in south-east Asia, the Indian subcontinent, on islands in the Pacific and there is one species in northern Australia.

In recent years, hybrids between *L. indica* and *L. subcostata* var. *fauriei* (from Japan, China and Taiwan) have formed the basis of the horticultural range *Indian Summer Crepe Myrtles* which have characteristics such as frost tolerance, resistance to fungal disease, a great variety of growth habits as well as many new and glorious flower colours.



World distribution of *Lagerstroemia*. Map modified from Kew Science Plants of the World Online, and Atlas of Living Australia.

There is an Australian species, *Lagerstroemia engleriana* (previously *L. archeriana*) that is somewhat of an enigma. Crepe Myrtles tend to be associated with tropical and subtropical environments, but this species, with delicate mauve pink flowers so characteristic of *Lagerstroemia*, thrives in harsh, seasonally dry environments of the monsoon tropics of Cape York and Kimberley. It's also known from the Lesser Sunda Islands, Maluku, Sulawesi and New Guinea.



Australian native *Lagerstroemia engleriana* (syn. *L. archeriana*) in the Gold Coast Regional Botanic Gardens
Photograph: Peter Reilly

In China, records of cultivation of *Lagerstroemia indica* date back to 1700 years ago. They have been recorded in Chinese paintings at least from 16th Century and brought to Beijing supposedly by the Ming court. It is

variously known as 紫薇 (Purple Rose), 猿滑 (Slippery Monkey) and 百日红 (One Hundred Days Red), the latter refers to the ability of a crimson flowered variety to produce flowers for an exceptionally long time, and red and crimson colours, of course, are seen as particularly auspicious in China. Crepe Myrtles have also long been cultivated as garden plants in the western world and were introduced into Europe in the mid-1600s, and to southeastern North America in the mid-1700s.



White flowers of *Lagerstroemia subcostata* var. *fauriei*

Although they are commonly referred to as Crepe **Myrtles**, they are not closely related to the Myrtle plant

family, **Myrtaceae**, which includes so many of our iconic Australian native plants, such as *Eucalyptus*, *Callistemon* (bottlebrush), *Leptospermum* (tea tree) and *Melaleuca*. **Crepe** describes the flower petals, soft, fine, wrinkled and delicate, rather like old-fashioned crêpe paper. *Lagerstroemia* species belong in the *Lythrum* plant family, Lythraceae.



Figure 295. 1-2. *Lagerstroemia indica* Linnaeus, 1753: 611. —1. Flowering branch. —2. Flower. 3-7. *L. indica* var. *L. indica* f. *alba* (L.) T. & G. 1847: 356. —3. Flowering branch. —4. Flowering branch. —5. Flower. —6. Longitudinal section of flower showing staminal post. —7. Same as 6. —8. Same as 6. —9. Same as 6. —10. Same as 6. —11. Same as 6. —12. Same as 6. —13. Same as 6. —14. Same as 6. —15. Same as 6. —16. Same as 6. —17. Same as 6. —18. Same as 6. —19. Same as 6. —20. Same as 6.

Atlas of Living Australia: [Lagerstroemia archeriana](#) | Search | Atlas of Living Australia

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Illustration from *Flora of China* by He Shun Qing,

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Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Plants of the World Online: [Lagerstroemia L.](#) | Plants of the World Online | Kew Science

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