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As Southerners, we tend not to give too much thought to winter and plant hardiness. As Memphians, unfortunately, we should. Our particular region is known as the "upper South," which, pardon the expression, is nearly north. We have brief winters, lovely springs, hellish summers and delightful falls. All of which in the last ten years have included record highs, frosts, floods, drouth, ice, wind and any other weather extremes. We are anything but serene.

While we are technically in temperature zone 7, with expected moderate winters, we have experienced several winters in this decade that have caused dramatic damage to plants in our challenging corner of the Southeast. Therefore in addition to selecting heat and drouth tolerant plant varieties for our gardens we also need plants that can tolerate extreme or sudden cold temperatures.

Most of us will remember the ice storm of 1994 which gripped Memphis and ravaged its trees. And you might have noticed that spring of 1996 persisted in surprise late spring freezes repeatedly! But it was the winter of 1989 that got many of us looking to plants that are hardy further north than zone 7.

If you were gardening in Memphis that year you probably lost your Burford Holly, your Gardenia, your grandfather's fifteen foot Fig tree, your Hydrangeas turned to pudding yet survived, and your Crepe Myrtles that you spent six years guiding into graceful little trees, were frozen back to ground zero. Also that year nurserymen and women lost any plant in a container that was not in a greenhouse and homeowners spent their tax refunds replacing cherished trees and shrubs. It was a stellar year for Mother Nature who seems to delight in experimentation.

I was working at Trees by Touliatos here in Memphis that year and I remember it well. I remember that the nursery lost all of its container stock. What Plato Touliatos remembers in particular, is that of the thirty varieties of Crepe Myrtles they grew in the ground around the nursery, only one survived: "Sarah's Favorite." While we threw away every other plant in

containers that year, this Crepe Myrtle survived in the ground and in containers and has continued to exhibit great promise.

"Sarah's Favorite" has impressed Trees by Touliatos with rapid growth rate, durability, mildew resistance, abundant white flowers held erect, unlike its sibling "Natchez," and has a fine exfoliation light bark that peels to reveal a cinnamon color beneath. It is the last Crepe Myrtle to leaf in Spring and first to show color and become dormant in October and November, helping it to avoid frosts and attributing to its cold hardiness. Its ultimate height is still unknown but Plato says that those he planted in 1984 at the Second Presbyterian Church at Poplar and Goodlett in Memphis, now exceed 40 feet, despite record cold temperatures (and summer drouth) at this location.

The discovery of "Sarah's Favorite" began on a seed collecting expedition made 40 years ago by Dr. John Creech. Seeking and collecting plants for the National Arboretum in Washington, Dr. Creech collected seedlings of various Crepe Myrtles with notable characteristics. He brought back for research seed from promising varieties of Lagerstroemia indica, (Chinese Crepe Myrtle), hardy to zone 7, and Lagerstroemia faureii, a hardier Japanese variety. These seed were then grown and hybridized by Dr. Don Egolf for the National Arboretum, who made selections for mildew resistance, exfoliating bark and color. The seedlings were then distributed throughout the Southeastern United States to various cooperators who grew them and reported their data to Washington. From this work came a selection of hybrids, all bearing American Indian names that have become the standard for Crepe Myrtles in the industry.

When Mr. Tom Dodd Sr. of Tom Dodd Nurseries in Selmer, Alabama, a cooperator, was instructed to destroy all but a few select named varieties from the research for the national Arboretum, he held onto one he had

noticed. Its identity at the time was #5570. Mr. Dodd had noted its early dormancy and its excellent fall color Plato Touliatos here in Memphis purchased and promoted #5570, based on Mr. Dodd's opinion and their long-standing mutual respect.

But it was the winter of 1989 that determined the desirability of #5570, now named by Mr. Dodd "Sarah's Favorite" as a truly winter-hardy Crepe Myrtle for zone 7. The full range of its



winter hardiness is as yet unknown, but Trees by Touliatos shipped a few to the Cincinnati Zoo six winters ago and they continue to flourish there in zone 5. COLD!

Indeed there were a few other Crepe Myrtles here and there that year in Memphis that did not freeze to the ground, but be sure that it was their location, protected from the north or west winds, that caused them to survive. Their siblings were not so fortunate.

"Sarah's Favorite" can be viewed at the Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, at the Cincinnati Zoo, and at Trees by Touliatos.

I know you can't resist planting other varieties of Crepe Myrtles for ecstatic color and living with their possible demise, but if you really need a small, fast, durable shade tree to last for generations, this is the Crepe Myrtle for the "Upper South."

*Editor's Note: You are probably wondering "Who was Sarah?" The crepe myrtle was named for Sarah Touliatos, who so graciously loaned us the photos she had taken of one.*