

Bauhinia forficata **Brazilian Orchid-Tree¹**

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INTRODUCTION

One of the hardiest of the bauhinias, Brazilian Orchid-Tree is a deciduous to semi-evergreen tree reaching 25 to 30 feet in height with interesting twisted ascending branches which droop at the ends, an often-leaning trunk, and large, bilobed, dark green leaves (Fig. 1). The beautiful, white, three to four-inch-wide, orchid-like blooms appear in abundance from spring through summer and are followed by flat, dark brown seed pods. Brazilian Orchid-Tree makes a spectacular vase-shaped specimen, shade, or patio tree, or fits well into a mixed shrubby border. The trees vary in form when young from one individual to the next so uniform plantings are difficult to achieve. Trees become more uniform and symmetrical as they grow older. Probably too messy and sensitive to alkaline soil for a residential or downtown street tree but would grow well and be suited for a median strip where the debris would be washed away and less noticeable.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Bauhinia forficata*

Pronunciation: bah-HIN-ee-uh for-fih-KAY-tuh

Common name(s): Brazilian Orchid-Tree

Family: *Leguminosae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10 through 11 (Fig. 2)

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; shade tree; specimen

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

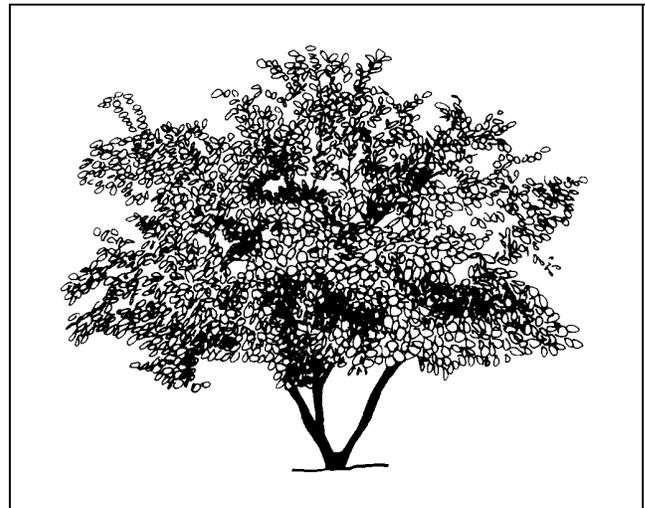


Figure 1. Middle-aged Brazilian Orchid-Tree.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 25 to 30 feet

Spread: 25 to 35 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms

Crown shape: round; spreading; vase shape

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: medium

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: lobed; cleft

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Leaf shape: orbiculate
Leaf venation: palmate
Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen; evergreen
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristics: summer flowering; very showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: elongated; pod
Fruit length: 6 to 12 inches
Fruit covering: dry or hard
Fruit color: brown
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; not particularly showy; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; thorns are present on the trunk or branches
Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure
Breakage: susceptible to breakage either at the crotch due to poor collar formation, or the wood itself is weak and tends to break
Current year twig color: brown
Current year twig thickness: medium; thin

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; slightly alkaline; acidic; well-drained
Drought tolerance: high
Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

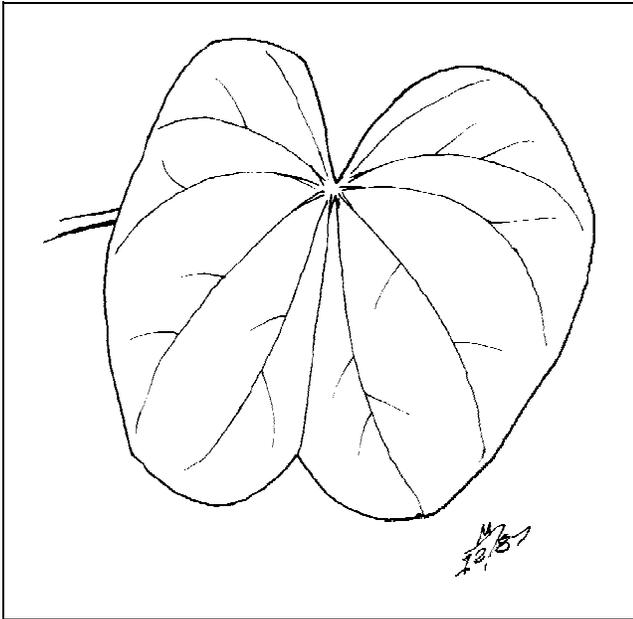


Figure 3. Foliage of Brazilian Orchid-Tree.

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: No entries found.

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Orchid trees benefit from some pruning early in their life to increase branchiness and to produce a form which will be suited for most landscapes. Left unpruned, many trees are beautiful, forming multiple trunks and branches close to the ground which is fine for specimen use in a lawn area or other open-space landscapes. Purchase trees with one trunk for parking lot or other urban landscapes where vehicular clearance will be necessary. Be sure to train branches so they will grow up before they spread out. If this is not done, lower branches will droop toward the ground and they may have to be removed, disfiguring the tree. Orchid trees drop fruit, small branches and leaves periodically so some people consider it a messy tree. But regularly fertilized in an acid soil, orchid tree is a wonderful flowering tree.

Growing in full sun or high, shifting pine shade, orchid tree thrives in any well-drained soil but in alkaline soils will show interveinal chlorosis (yellowing) on the leaves. Potassium deficiency shows

up as necrosis, magnesium deficiency as chlorosis. Although tolerant of some drought, Brazilian Orchid-Tree should receive some afternoon shade, or irrigation, in hot, dry weather to prevent the blooms from shrivelling up. The flowers are followed by many brown, woody, 12-inch-long seed pods which fill the tree and could be considered unattractive on the tree in the winter and a nuisance when they drop.

Propagation is by seed, suckers, layerings, or cuttings.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern. Potassium, magnesium and micronutrient deficiencies are common. Orchid tree seeds itself into the landscape.