UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

ENH248

# *Bauhinia forficata*: Brazilian Orchid Tree[1]

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## Introduction

One of the hardiest of the bauhinias, Brazilian orchid tree is a deciduous to semievergreen tree reaching 25- to 30-feet in height with interesting twisted ascending branches that droop at the ends, an often-leaning trunk, and large, bi-lobed, dark green leaves. The beautiful, white, 3- to 4-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 shrubbery 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.

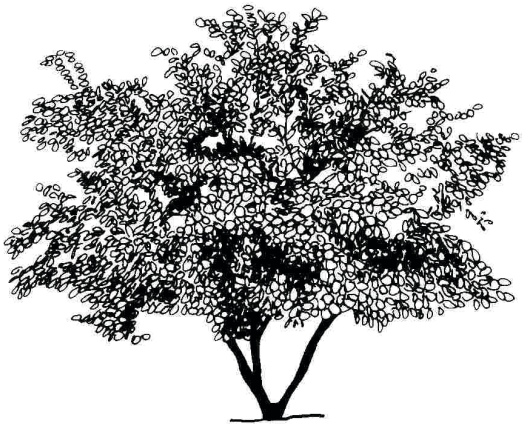

Figure 1. Middle-aged *Bauhinia forficata*: Brazilian OrchidTree

## 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:** 10A through 11 (Fig. 2)
**Origin:** not native to North America
**Invasive potential:** invasive non-native
**Uses:** deck or patio; specimen; highway median; shade
**Availability:** not native to North America

Figure 2. Range

## Description

**Height:** 25 to 30 feet
**Spread:** 25 to 35 feet
**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical
**Crown shape:** vase, round, spreading

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**Crown density:** dense
**Growth rate:** moderate
**Texture:** medium

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)
**Leaf type:** simple
**Leaf margin:** cleft, lobed
**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 color change
**Fall characteristic:** not showy

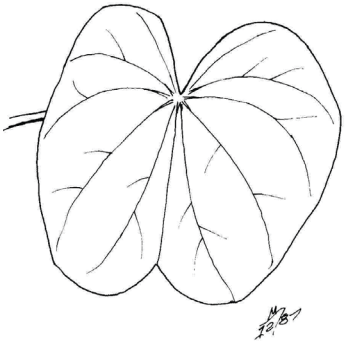

Figure 3. Foliage

## Flower

**Flower color:** white/cream/gray
**Flower characteristics:** very showy

Figure 4. Flower

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** elongated, pod or pod-like
**Fruit length:** 6 to 12 inches
**Fruit covering:** dry or hard
**Fruit color:** brown
**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/bark/branches:** branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns
**Pruning requirement:** needed for strong structure
**Breakage:** susceptible to breakage
**Current year twig color:** brown
**Current year twig thickness:** thin, medium
**Wood specific gravity:** unknown

## Culture

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

## Other

**Roots:** not a problem
**Winter interest:** no
**Outstanding tree:** yes
**Ozone sensitivity:** unknown
**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** unknown
**Pest resistance:** resistant to pests/diseases

# Use and Management

Orchid trees benefit from some pruning early in their life to increase branchiness and to produce a form that 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.