

# *Bauhinia aculeata*: White Orchid-Tree<sup>1</sup>

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

One of the hardiest of the bauhinias, white 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. 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. White Orchid-Tree makes a spectacular vase-shaped specimen, shade, or patio tree, or fits well into a mixed shrubby border provided it is grown in the full sun. The trees propagated from seed 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. Growth in alkaline soil is usually fine, but the leaves appear yellow between the veins.

## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Bauhinia aculeata*

**Pronunciation:** bah-HIN-ee-uh ah-kew-lee-AY-tuh

**Common name(s):** White orchid-tree

**Family:** Leguminosae

**USDA hardiness zones:** 9A through 11 (Figure 2)

**Origin:** not native to North America

**Invasive potential:** According to the IFAS Assessment of Non-Native Plants in Florida's Natural Areas (UF/IFAS Invasive Plant Working Group 2008), *Bauhinia aculeata* is invasive and not recommended in Florida (to see if any exceptions for specified and limited use have been approved since publication, check the Conclusions Table at: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/assessment/conclusions.html>).

**Uses:** shade; reclamation; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; specimen; parking lot island < 100 sq. ft.; parking lot island 100–200 sq. ft.; parking lot island > 200 sq. ft.; tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft. wide; highway median

**Availability:** not native to North America



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Bauhinia aculeata*: white orchid-tree.

1. This document is ENH246, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2006 and February 2013. Reviewed June 2016. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; and Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.



Figure 2. Range

## Description

**Height:** 25 to 30 feet  
**Spread:** 15 to 25 feet  
**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical  
**Crown shape:** vase  
**Crown density:** moderate  
**Growth rate:** fast  
**Texture:** coarse

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)  
**Leaf type:** simple  
**Leaf margin:** cleft, lobed  
**Leaf shape:** orbiculate  
**Leaf venation:** palmate  
**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous  
**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches  
**Leaf color:** green  
**Fall color:** no color change  
**Fall characteristic:** not showy

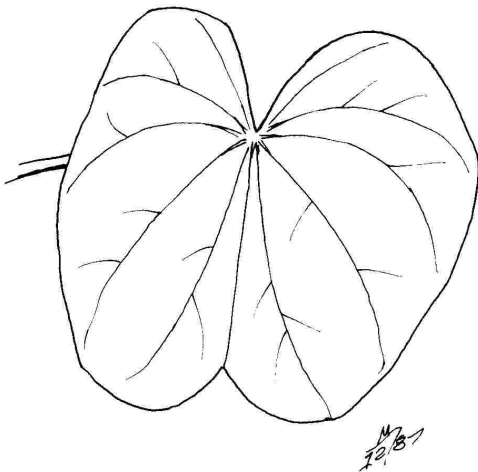


Figure 3. Foliage

## Flower

**Flower color:** white/cream/gray  
**Flower characteristics:** 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; can be trained to one trunk; 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, partial sun or partial shade  
**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:** no  
**Ozone sensitivity:** unknown  
**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** unknown  
**Pest resistance:** free of serious pests and diseases

## Use and Management

Orchid-tree benefits 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, 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 drought, white orchid-tree can benefit from some afternoon shade, or irrigation, in hot, dry weather to prevent the blooms from shrivelling up. The flowers are followed by many brown, woody 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.

## Literature Cited

Fox, A.M., D.R. Gordon, J.A. Dusky, L. Tyson, and R.K. Stocker. 2008. UF/IFAS Assessment of Non-Native Plants in Florida's Natural Areas: Status Assessment. [http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/assessment/pdfs/status\\_assessment.pdf](http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/assessment/pdfs/status_assessment.pdf) (November 16, 2012)