

***Bauhinia forficata*: Brazilian Orchid Tree¹**

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Introduction

One of the hardiest of the bauhinias, Brazilian orchid tree or cow's foot 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, bilobed, 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 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, cow's foot

Family: *Fabaceae*

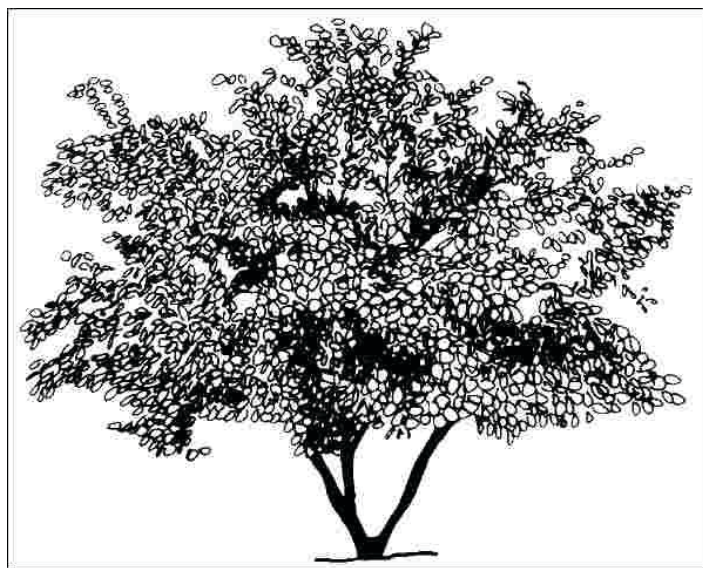


Figure 1. Middle-aged *Bauhinia forficata*: Brazilian orchid tree.

USDA hardiness zones: 10A through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: not native to North America

Invasive potential: not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North, Central, South)

Uses: deck or patio; specimen; highway median; shade

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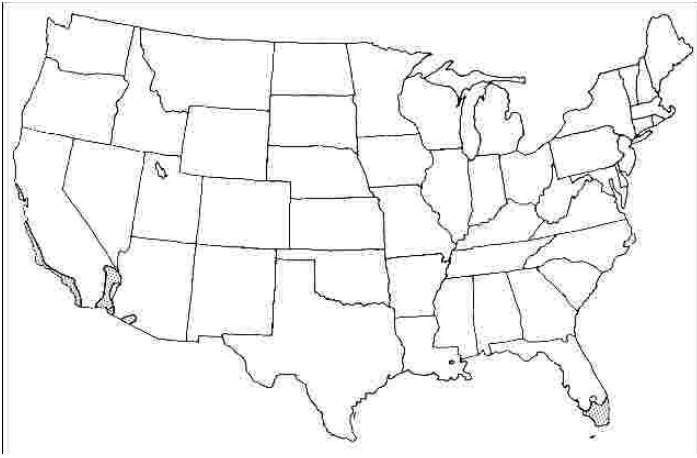


Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 25 to 30 feet

Spread: 25 to 35 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: vase, round, spreading

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Figure 3)

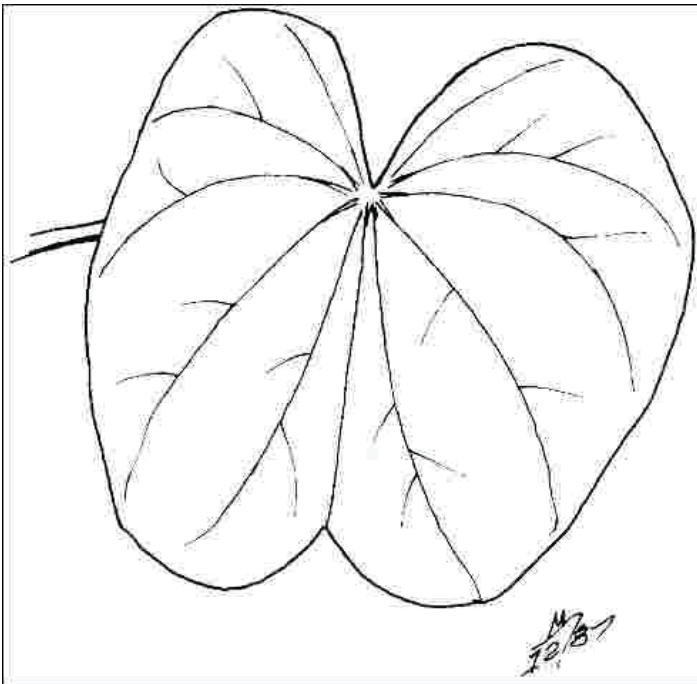


Figure 3. Foliage

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

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 branching 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 acidic soil, orchid tree is a wonderful flowering tree.

Grow in full sun or high, shifting pine shade. Orchid tree thrives in any well-drained soil, but will show interveinal chlorosis (yellowing) on the leaves when grown in alkaline soils. 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 shriveling 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.