

Bauhinia purpurea: Purple Orchid-Tree¹

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Introduction

This fast-growing orchid-tree will ultimately reach 35 feet in height and width, the slender trunks topped with arching branches clothed in large, two-lobed, deciduous leaves. In fall, before the leaves drop, orchid-tree is festooned with many showy and delightfully fragrant, 5-inch-wide blossoms, the narrow purple, pink, and lavender petals arranged to closely resemble an orchid. These flowers appear on the trees from September through November and are a beautiful sight to see, creating a vivid splash of color in the autumn landscape. The flowers are followed by 12-inch-long, slender, brown, flat seedpods which usually persist on the tree throughout the winter, then fall to create a mess to clean up. The spectacular flower display makes orchid-tree a favorite for specimen plantings.



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Bauhinia purpurea*: purple orchid-tree.
Credits: R.A. Howard @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

General Information

Scientific name: *Bauhinia purpurea*

Pronunciation: bah-HIN-ee-uh per-POOR-ee-uh

Common name(s): Purple orchid-tree

Family: *Leguminosae*

USDA hardiness zones: 9B 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 (IFAS Invasive Plant Working Group 2008), *Bauhinia purpurea* 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: reclamation; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; shade; 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: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

Description

Height: 30 to 35 feet

Spread: 30 to 35 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: vase, round

Crown density: moderate

Growth rate: fast

Texture: coarse

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Figure 2. Range

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Figure 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

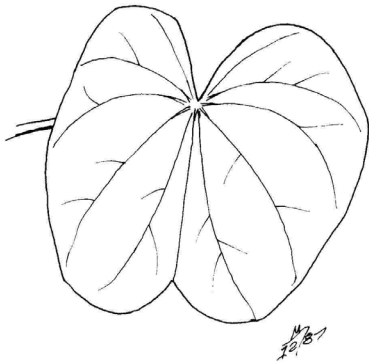


Figure 3. Foliage

Flower

Flower color: red, purple, blue
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; 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: medium, thin
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: yes
Outstanding tree: no
Ozone sensitivity: unknown
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown
Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

Orchid-tree should be grown in full sun on well-drained soil. Trees are very drought-tolerant and actually flower best on dry soils. Problems include a tendency to show nutritional deficiencies, especially potassium; the weak wood which is susceptible to breakage in storms; the abundant seedlings which may germinate in the landscape; and the litter problem created by the falling leaves, flowers, and seedpods. Orchid-tree may need occasional pruning to develop a uniform shape when it is young. Branches tend to develop low on the trunk and droop toward the ground forming a large bush if left unpruned. Occasional pruning during the life of the tree will help maintain a nice, neat appearance.

Propagation is by seeds, grafting, cuttings, and air-layerings.

Pests

Borers, caterpillars, and mites.

Diseases

Leaf spot and leaf scorch diseases.

Literature Cited

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