

# *Bauhinia variegata*: Orchid Tree<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The fast-growing white orchid tree grows 20- to 40-feet in height with a 25- to 35-foot-spread, the slender trunks topped with arching branches clothed in large, two-lobed, deciduous leaves. In fall, before the leaves drop, white Orchid tree is festooned with many showy and delightfully fragrant, three to five-inch-wide, purplish to white, orchid-shaped blossoms. These flowers appear on Orchid trees from January to April and are a beautiful sight to see. The flowers are followed by 6 to 9-inch-long, slender, brown, flat seedpods, which usually persist on the tree throughout the winter. This spectacular display makes Orchid tree a favorite for specimen and street-tree plantings.

## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Bauhinia variegata*

**Pronunciation:** bah-HIN-ee-uh vair-ee-eh-GAY-tuh

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

**Family:** *Fabaceae*

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

**Origin:** native to India, Vietnam, and southeastern China

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** invasive and not recommended (South); caution, may be recommended but manage to prevent escape (Central); not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North)



Figure 1. Full Form - *Bauhinia variegata*: orchid tree

Credits: UF/IFAS

**Uses:** reclamation; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; shade; 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; specimen

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Figure 2. Range

## Description

**Height:** 20 to 40 feet

**Spread:** 25 to 35 feet

**Crown uniformity:** irregular

**Crown shape:** vase

**Crown density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** fast

**Texture:** medium

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate

**Leaf type:** simple

**Leaf margin:** cleft, lobed

**Leaf shape:** orbiculate

**Leaf venation:** palmate

**Leaf type and persistence:** semi-evergreen, deciduous

**Leaf blade length:** 4 to 6 inches

**Leaf color:** bright to dull green

**Fall color:** no color change

**Fall characteristic:** not showy



Figure 3. Leaf - *Bauhinia variegata*: orchid tree  
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## Flower

**Flower color:** purplish to white

**Flower characteristics:** very showy; fragrant; orchid-like and emerges in clusters at branch tips

**Flowering:** late winter to early summer



Figure 4. Flower - *Bauhinia variegata*: orchid tree  
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## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** elongated, flattened, pod or pod-like

**Fruit length:** 6 to 9 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/branches:** branches droop; not showy; can be trained to one trunk; no thorns

**Bark:** gray and smooth to slightly rough

**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





Figure 5. Fruit - *Bauhinia variegata*: orchid tree  
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Figure 6. Bark - *Bauhinia variegata*: orchid tree  
Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

## Culture

**Light requirement:** full sun to 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

White 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.

## Pests

Caterpillars, mites, and borers.

## Diseases

Leaf spot, leaf scorch, and mushroom root rot diseases.

## References

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