Bauhinia aculeata
White Orchid-Tree

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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 (Fig. 1). 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 shrubbery 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: 9 through 11 (Fig. 2)
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; reclamation plant; shade tree; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); narrow tree lawns (3-4 feet wide); specimen; residential street tree
Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

DESCRIPTION

Height: 25 to 30 feet
Spread: 15 to 25 feet
**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms  
**Crown shape:** vase shape  
**Crown density:** moderate  
**Growth rate:** fast  
**Texture:** coarse

### Foliage

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

### Flower

- **Flower color:** white  
- **Flower characteristics:** fall flowering; showy; spring flowering; summer flowering

### Fruit

- **Fruit shape:** elongated; pod  
- **Fruit length:** 6 to 12 inches  
- **Fruit covering:** dry or hard  
- **Fruit color:** brown  
- **Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; persistent on the tree; showy

### Trunk and Branches

- **Trunk/bark/branches:** droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; not particularly showy; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns
**Pruning requirement:** requires pruning to develop strong structure

**Breakage:** susceptible to breakage either at the crotch due to poor collar formation, or the wood itself is weak and tends to break

**Current year twig color:** brown

**Current year twig thickness:** medium; thin

**Culture**

**Light requirement:** tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

**Soil tolerances:** clay; loam; sand; slightly alkaline; acidic; well-drained

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Aerosol salt tolerance:** moderate

**Other**

**Roots:** surface roots are usually not a problem

**Winter interest:** no special winter interest

**Outstanding tree:** not particularly outstanding

**Invasive potential:** No entries found.

**Pest resistance:** no pests are normally seen on the tree

**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.