**Bauhinia purpurea**  
**Purple Orchid-Tree**

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

**INTRODUCTION**

The 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 (Fig. 1). In fall, before the leaves drop, Orchid-Tree is festooned with many showy and delightfully fragrant, five-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.

**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 (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:** 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 canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms  
- **Crown shape:** round; vase shape  
- **Crown density:** moderate  
- **Growth rate:** fast  
- **Texture:** coarse

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2. Edward F. Gilman, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.
**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:** blue; purple; red
- **Flower characteristics:** fall flowering; very showy; winter 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: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers
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 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, mites.

Diseases

Leaf spot, leaf scorch diseases.