

City of Plantation Landscape Architecture presents ...

Plant of the Quarter



Hong Kong Orchid Tree/ Bauhinia blakeana and Bauhinia variegata 'Candida'

Each quarter the Department of Landscape Architecture features an outstanding flowering tree that will be blooming during that quarter. This time, however, choosing a flowering tree was a real challenge. After searching through all of our plant books and wonderful plant lists we found there weren't many that are winter bloomers; even fewer that are readily available.

So this quarter, I give you the **Hong Kong Orchid Tree**, botanically known as genus *Bauhinia* (Bo-hin-ee-a). You will not be disappointed with its spectacular, showy blooms. There are at least seven species of *Bauhinia*. I will tell you about two winter blooming varieties: *Bauhinia blakeana* and *Bauhinia variegata 'Candida.'*

The origin of the Hong Kong Orchid Tree is China. The name *Bauhinia* was named after the Bauhin brothers who were sixteenth century herbalists. Some species are also native to India and other warm tropical areas.

The foliage has an unusual double-lobed shape, like two wide wings joined in the middle. The flower and foliage combined with the branching characteristics give this tree a coarse or dominate character in the landscape. *B. blakeana* is the most spectacular and most sought after *Bauhinia*. It is an evergreen tree with orchid-like reddish or rose purple flowers three to six inches across. It has no fruit and therefore no fruit drop. The season of bloom is fall/winter.

B. variegata 'Candida' is a deciduous tree (meaning it loses its leaves) with pure white nearly orchid-like flowers. It produces a one inch long black pod. Some consider fruit, flower and foliage drop to be messy. The season of bloom is winter/spring.

Some of the specifics:

?? **Height and spread:** This is a fast growing tree that ranges from 25 to 40 feet with a spread of about 20 to 25 feet. I would say it is easily a 25 to 30 foot tree. Even the older trees I've seen have not been over 40 feet. It is a good choice for a large, open, backyard space. Look closely at the structure of the tree if you decide to purchase one. It likes to form a co-dominant trunk structure (having more than one main trunk). When the tree gets older there is a higher chance that the two opposing trunks will split apart. Choose one with one main trunk. Otherwise, each tree has its own personality. We like to say this type of tree is a 'character' tree. It is part of its charm!

?? **Exposure:** It grows in full sun but is tolerant of partial shade such as in the shadow of taller open trees or palms.

?? **Soil:** It is tolerant of a wide range of soil types that is well drained.

?? **Water requirements:** Trees are very drought tolerant and actually flower better on dry soils (good xeriscape plant once established, 6-12 months).

- ?? **Problems** : Trees will tend to show a potassium (K) deficiency. Use a fertilizer for flowering plant material that has an analysis NPK rating that is slightly higher in the last number i.e. 13-3-13.
- ?? **Insects and diseases**: Generally this is a carefree tree. It may however, be may be prone to borers, caterpillars and mites. Listed as a possible problem is leaf spot and leaf scorch diseases.
- ?? **Disadvantages**: Weak wood is susceptible to breakage in storms. This species will need your help in its youth. It will need pruning to maintain a dominant leader. Remove competing secondary branches when they are small. You will feel like a bonsai artist but you will have a lovely character tree. B. blakeana is very cold sensitive.



The Bauhinia can be used for seasonal color, shade, accent or as a specimen. We have seen this tree used in medians, on average-to-large residential lots and on large commercial properties. In Plantation, look for trees grouped together in a line in the overhead shade of large Royal Palms at the entrances of Cornerstone Office complex at Pine Island Rd. near I-595 and on Peters Road.

Most nurseries carry several varieties of Bauhinia. Be sure to select the winter blooming varieties we suggest with strong branching characteristics.

Good luck and happy botanizing!