

Hong Kong Orchid Trees Are Long Flowering for Snow Birds

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Looking for long-lasting flowering impact? It will be hard to beat the Hong Kong orchid tree, *Bauhinia x blakeana*. It has 6-inch, pink-lavender flowers (petals do not overlap) for about 5 months from late October to March. Stephen Brown, my counterpart in Lee County and flowering tree aficionado, rates this tree an “A+” for its 119 days of intense blooming.

For the record and those north of the border, the orchid tree is not in the orchid family, but rather it is in the bean or legume family. What is unique about the Hong Kong orchid is that it is sterile, it has no bean pods, hence no seeds, as do other *Bauhinia* species. In fact, it is rather a mystery as to how it came to be. It is reported, in botanical folklore, back when, a single tree was discovered in Canton, China by monks (Catholic or Buddhist?). Every Hong Kong orchid tree since then is a graft or air layer or cutting from that

original bud wood. The genus name *Bauhinia* is derived from the Bauhin brothers who were famous botanists. The leaf has 2 distinct lobes and hence (of course!) the genus,

Bauhinia. Anyway, these trees grow rapidly to about a 35 foot height and 25 foot width. The wood is moderately weak. It can take some pruning to get a nice shape and raise the branches above walking injury level.

Flowers of the fall orchid tree (*Bauhinia purpurea*) have narrow petals and 3 stamens (pollen bearing filaments) instead of 5 stamens as the above species have.



Hong Kong orchid tree (*Bauhinia x Blakeana*) flower. Note the petals are distinctly separated.



Flowers of the orchid tree or mountain-ebony (*Bauhinia variegata*). Note that the petals almost overlap or touch.!





A Hong Kong orchid tree in full bloom in February in Naples makes for a delightful splash of winter color.

They have some minor insect problems from year to year such as lace bugs and IO moth caterpillar and Sri Lanka weevil chewing and mites during the winter. Orchid trees prefer acidic soils, which we rarely have, so we see some potassium nutrient deficiency symptoms which can be alleviated with proper fertilizing, the more micro-nutrients, the better.

There is a “bad brother” orchid tree, *Bauhinia variegata*, called the orchid tree or mountain ebony. But, personally, I feel it has prettier flowers more closely resembling full orchid blooms with petals which overlap slightly. Unfortunately, it is officially banned (FLEPPC-Category 1) as an invasive exotic, which means it should not be sold any more. Although there is also a white

flowering type, *Candida*, still available in the trade. *Bauhinia variegata* has a shorter bloom period, January through April. Stephen Brown rates it at 35 days of intense blooming days.¹ It creates a canopy of seed pods which make it a messier tree than the Hong Kong orchid tree.

Another *Bauhinia* is the fall orchid tree, *Bauhinia purpurea*. However, it flowers less, from September through November, and the flower petals are narrower than the other species, so why not go with the Hong Kong orchid tree, after all?!

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¹ http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/Hort/Videos_and_Powerpoints/IBDs_Florida_Flowering_Trees.pdf

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