

June 2025

Plant of the month

Hong Kong Orchid Tree



Common Name: Hong Kong Orchid tree
Scientific Name: *Bauhinia x blakeana* Dunn.
Family: Fabaceae
Genus: *Bauhinia* – for brothers, Gaspard and Jean Bauhin, 17th century botanists.
Species epithet: *blakeana* – for Sir Henry Blake, Governor of Hong Kong 1898 – 1903.



First discovered in 1880 by Jean-Marie Delavay, a French Catholic missionary, near a ruined building at Pokfulam, Hong Kong. He saw the beautiful pink flowers and took a cutting, which he propagated and grew at the sanatorium run by the missionaries in Hong Kong. Sometime later, a cutting from this tree, was grown at the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens and described botanically in 1908. Following 1914, this botanic garden started distributing cuttings of the tree. It is thought more than 25,000 cuttings have been distributed world-wide. They are all clones (genetically identical) to that first tree discovered in 1880. Although suspected earlier, it was not until 2005 that scientists were able to conclude that this tree was a hybrid of two other *Bauhinia* species, *Bauhinia variegata* and *Bauhinia purpurea*. This hybrid is sterile and does not produce viable seed, meaning trees only exists because of vegetative propagation by people. Since 1997, the flower has appeared on the Hong Kong coat of arms, its flag and coins. A statue of the flower was erected in Golden Bauhinia square, Hong Kong.



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Distribution

A chance hybrid, known only from cultivation, discovered from a single location – at Pokfulam on the western shore of Hong Kong.

Description

Tree around 9m tall with a spread of 4.5m. Leaves are 7–10cm long and 10–13cm wide, with a deep cleft dividing the apex. They are double-lobed, shaped like the wings of a butterfly. In Hong Kong, the leaf is known as the “Clever Leaf” and is regarded as a symbol of wisdom.

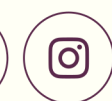
Flowers

Although resembling those of orchids flowers are closely related to peas and beans. Flowers are large (15cm across), showy, deep pink, fragrant and with 5–6 stamens (distinguishing it from similar-looking *Bauhinia purpurea* which has 3–4 stamens).

Fruit

Plants are sterile and do not produce fruit or seed.

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