

Heliconia L.
(Bihai)

Heliconia

Other Common Names: Parrot's Flower and Lobster Claw, see additional taxa below.

Family: Sometimes placed in its own family, Heliconiaceae Nakai, other times placed in the more broadly defined Strelitziaceae or Musaceae.

Cold Hardiness: A tropical or at least subtropical genus, *Heliconia* is found in regions with little or no frost; *Heliconia spp.* can be found in outdoor landscapes in USDA plant hardiness zones 10(9b) to 13, but most species are much better in zones 10 and warmer; recovery from freezes is often poor.

Foliage: Leaves are sympodial with the emerging stalks; blades are elliptic to paddle-shaped, simple, with entire margins and acute to acuminate tips; petiole bases wrapped around the stalk; depending upon the species they can be held horizontally or slightly recurved to strongly erect (see habit below); venation is pinnate or nearly parallel; size is highly variable from around 1' to as much as 6' long; the bold foliage can be medium green, bluish green to a dark lustrous green at maturity; leaves are usually lighter colored beneath and most are not pubescent.

Flower: Small perfect flowers are inconsequential aesthetically, but the showy bracts and bracteoles can be spectacular; few to fifty flowers are held in erect or pendent terminal racemes; flowers have five functional stamens and one staminode; the primary bract is lobster claw-shaped to spathe-like and frequently very showy; flowers have variations of bright rich dark green, bright, yellow, orange, to red colors; secondary bracteoles may also be showy, and come in similar colors, but may also be white; the size of the flower parts within the bract vary among species and in some are essentially entirely hidden within the bract, whereas in others they rather resemble a bug upturned in the center of a boat-like bract; individual flowers bloom for a day, but the bracts remain effective for an extended period of time and are often used as cut flowers in the floral industry; individual stalks are polycarpic, dying back to the ground while new stalks arise from the rhizome.

Fruit: Small knob-like drupes, not ornamental; not frequently produced in cultivation in our region.

Stem / Bark: Stems — sympodial branching with successively wrapped leaf bases; Buds — buds elongate shortly after formation to continue the growth of the stem or form a flower; Bark — not applicable.

Habit: Most taxa are rhizomatous herbaceous perennials with unbranched stalks ranging in size from that of small shrubs to small trees, often suckering to form spreading colonies; three general growth habits are found within the genus: musoid = those with growth forms resembling the bananas (*Musa*) with long petioles spirally arranged leaves, zingiberoid = those with growth forms resembling ginger (members of the Zingiberaceae) in distichous opposite paddle-shaped leaves, or cannoid leaves resembling those of *Canna* (*Canna x generalis*) where leaves have short petioles and are erect; mature heights range from 2' to 20' with slow to moderate spread of colonies in width; textures are typically coarse to very coarse.

Cultural Requirements: Best performance is in tropical to subtropical environments with mesic to rainforest climates but some can tolerate light frost; light requirement for flowering vary among species from moderate shade to full sun, but nearly all require regular moisture in the soils; most taxa need acidic fertile soils for good bloom; wind exposure tends to tatter the foliage as with *Musa spp.*

Pathological Problems: Seldom bothered in landscapes by pests, but in interiorscapes and greenhouses typical pests such as scale, mealy bugs, and spider mites can become occasional problems; in moist environments slugs and snails can damage new leaves.

Ornamental Assets: Many taxa sport stunning Bird-Of-Paradise-like flowers which are favorites of various humming birds are the principal assets of *Heliconia*; most offer bold coarse ginger to banana foliage-like; numerous forms of wildlife feed on the nectar, fruit, or water collected in the bracts of species with erect inflorescences.

Limitations & Liabilities: Cold temperatures are the primary limitations; plants also need favorable environments with moist fertile soils to flower regularly.

Landscape Utilization: Widely utilized in subtropical to tropical landscapes throughout the world as accents or focal points in the landscape; good shade tolerance in some species render them suitable for understory use; smaller stature species work well in containers as well as in the ground; intermediate and taller species make good background or screening plants, particularly for areas with less than perfectly drained soils; in our region,

their outdoor utilization is restricted to protected areas along the Gulf Coast and deep South Texas; *Heliconia* spp. are staples in conservatories and are sometimes included in larger scale interiorscapes; several species are commonly grown for the cut flower trade.

Other Comments: Even the genus name alludes to the beauty of the genus, associating them with Mount Helicon in Greece where according to Greek mythology the muses live; while it is questionable as to how inspirational they this genus may be, they certainly do remind one of the beauty of the tropics.

Native Habitat: Although species from this genus are most often linked in the public's eyes with tropical Pacific Islands, only about a half dozen species farm that region, while the bulk of the genus is from the New World in Caribbean, Central America or South America.

Related Taxa: The genus *Heliconia* contains 200 to 250 species and is a highly variable group morphologically and geographically which has led to substantial confusion and disagreement on the taxonomy and nomenclature of many taxa within the genus; the discussion herein largely follows GRIN for some of the more commonly cultivated taxa; provenance differences are substantial within the more widely distributed species and may offer an opportunity to select genotypes more adapted to wider use in our region.

Heliconia caribaea J.-B. Lamarck

Wild Plantain

(*Bihai borinquena*, *Bihai borinquena*, *Bihai conferta*, *Heliconia borinquena*, *Heliconia conferta*)

- *Heliconia caribaea* is also known as Golden Heliconia, Plantanillo or Riqui-Riqui; this large, 12' to 18' (20') tall *Heliconia* blooms most heavily during the summer and possesses massive banana-leaf shaped foliage up to 6' long; native to the Caribbean as the specific epithet would imply, *H. caribaea* is mostly tropical thriving in USDA zones 10 to 13 on moist fertile highly humus soils in full sun to partial shade.
- Several variants are available as cultivar in this species offering differing bract colors in various combinations of red, yellow, green and purple; bracts are stoutish looking and held in tight erect inflorescences.

Heliconia psittacorum L.f.

Parrot's-Flower

- *Heliconia psittacorum* is also known as Japanese Canna, Golden Torch, Parakeet Flower, Parrot's Heliconia Parrot's Plantain, or Periquitos; native to Central and South America (Mesoamerica); this *Heliconia* has canna-like foliage and forms colonies 3' to 6' tall that spread over time; flowers have narrower bracts than other species and are in short erect inflorescences, sort of vaguely resembling Indian Shot (*Canna indica*), hence the common names referencing Canna; bracts are usually yellow to orange, but may also be found with white, pink or green colors; in many respects it reminds one of a *Canna* in the landscape and can serve similar functions; the specific epithet means of parrots.
- *Heliconia psittacorum* is useful as a low screen or can be effective on soils that remain rather wetter than is favorable for many shrubs; it also has a degree of drought and wind tolerance, but does not handle salt well nor does it perform well on high pH soils; growth can be rapid and under favorable conditions it can become weedy; although flowers are less spectacular than some of the other *Heliconia*, *H. psittacorum* is durable, easy to grown and generally attractive; useful in USDA zones 10 to 13.

Heliconia rostrata H. Ruiz & J.A. Pavon

Lobster Claw

(*Bihai poeppigiana*, *Bihai rostrata*, *Heliconia pendula*, *Heliconia poeppigiana*)

- *Heliconia rostrata* is also known as False Bird-Of-Paradise, Hanging Lobster Claw, Painted Lobster Claw, or Parrot's Beak Heliconia; this 6' to 10' (rarely 20') tall species has green to bluish green paddle-shaped leaves up to 5'; inflorescences are composed of long spectacular pendulous racemes of inverted lobster-claw shaped bracts in a slightly zigzag arrangement; bracts have short bristly hairs; the specific epithet means beaked in reference to the shape of the bracts; basal (top due to the inverted inflorescence) bracts are longer than those nearer the terminus; several variants are reported, but the most commonly grown selections have bright red with yellow and green tinged edges and tips.
- Native primarily to the Amazon basin in Peru and Ecuador, this species is useful in USDA zones 10(9) to 13, but is perhaps less tolerant of salt and wind exposure than some of the other *Heliconia*; full sun to partial shade are best for flower development; growth is fairly rapid.
- *Heliconia bihai* (L.) L. 'Lobster-claw One', also known as Lobster-Claw Heliconia or Wild Plantain, has a similar appearing inflorescence as *H. rostrata* but is held erect instead of being pendulous; bracts are a bit more drawn out and up with more of a scarlet to lighter red with green margins; a major attraction for this large 12 to 16 tall *Heliconia* is its better tolerance to cold than most taxa; it is shoot hardy in USDA zones 10(9) to 13 and plants

are reported to return from the rhizomes following freezes in USDA zone 9, perhaps even 8b in a really protected location.

Heliconia stricta J. Huber

Firebird Heliconia

(*Bihai stricta*, *Heliconia tricolor*, *Heliconia wagneriana*)

- *Heliconia stricta* is also known as Dwarf Jamaican Heliconia, this large *Heliconia* is native to Central American and northern portions of South America; plants typically grow 8' to 12' (15') tall with leaves that resemble banana leaves, but dwarf selections are widely available; the bright red midribs on the leaves help to identify the species; some dwarf selections are available; plants need sunny locations to flower well; this taxon is useful in USDA zones 11(10) to 13.
- The specific epithet means erect or upright in reference to the inflorescences; inflorescences are composed of stout compactly placed bracts that are may be solid red or yellow, or largely green with a red or pink splotch with a thin yellow hollow on each side; the latter sometimes being separated into the species *H. wagneriana*.

References: Holttum and Enoch, 2002; Llamas, 2003; Rauch and Weissich, 2000; Riffle, 1998; Walker, 1992.

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