

Heliconia caribaea Caribbean Heliconia, Wild Plantain¹

Edward F. Gilman and Alan Meerow²

Introduction

The wild plantain is an herbaceous perennial with leathery, dark green leaves which are borne on long petioles arising directly from the ground (Fig. 1). The wild plantain has no trunk or stems but manages to grow 10 to 15 feet tall due to the enormous leaves. The attractive petioles are usually 4 to 5 feet long, and the leaf blade is equally as long. The flowers are held in showy clusters that emerge from second year stalks. They are enclosed by scarlet or yellow colored bracts that are 6 to 8 inches long. This unique plant is used as a specimen for tropical gardens. The inflorescence may be cut for indoor decoration where they last for several weeks.



Figure 1. Caribbean heliconia.

General Information

Scientific name: *Heliconia caribaea*

Pronunciation: hel-lick-KOE-nee-uh kuh-RIB-ee-uh

Common name(s): Caribbean heliconia, wild plantain

Family: *Heliconiaceae*

Plant type: herbaceous

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Fig. 2)

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: cut flowers; suitable for growing indoors

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 10 to 15 feet

Spread: 3 to 6 feet

Plant habit: upright

Plant density: open

Growth rate: fast

Texture: coarse

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; and Alan Meerow, former associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, Ft. Lauderdale REC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple multi-trunked or clumping
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: ovate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen
Leaf blade length: more than 36 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Flower of Caribbean heliconia

Flower

Flower color: red; yellow
Flower characteristic: spring flowering; summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: unknown
Fruit length: unknown
Fruit cover: unknown
Fruit color: blue
Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems
Current year stem/twig color: green
Current year stem/twig thickness: very thick

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun
Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; sand; loam; clay
Drought tolerance: moderate
Soil salt tolerances: moderate
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive
Pest resistance: very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

Use and Management

Wild plantain will prosper in locations that receive full or partial sun. It grows and flowers best in fertile, moist soil. Fertilize this plant regularly during the growing season.

Propagate wild plantain by division of the matted clumps.

Pests and Diseases

This plant is bothered by *Cercospora* and *Helminthosporium* leaf spots. Scales and nematodes may also cause problems.