

Heliconia spp. *Heliconia*¹

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Introduction

The many species of heliconia are rainforest herbs that occur within the understory or densely at the forest periphery. A few rapidly colonize temporary tree-fall gaps or occur in the open along streams or in disturbed areas. They range from not much more than 1.5 feet in height to nearly 15 feet tall. The relatively inconspicuous flowers are borne in extravagantly colored bracts that are waxy and long lasting and have become high-priced tropical cut flowers. Some of the species bear pendant inflorescences, and these can be as long as several feet.



Figure 1. Full Form—*Heliconia* spp.: *Heliconia* 'Psittacorum'.
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Full Form—*Heliconia* spp.: *Heliconia* 'Vaginalis'.
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Figure 3. Flower—*Heliconia* spp.: *Heliconia* 'Vaginalis'.
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Figure 4. Flower—*Heliconia* spp.: *Heliconia* 'Hirsuta'.
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General Information

Scientific name: *Heliconia* spp.

Pronunciation: hel-lick-KOE-nee-uh species

Common name(s): heliconia

Family: *Heliconiaceae*

Plant type: herbaceous

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Figure 5)

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: not native to North America

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: cut flowers; suitable for growing indoors

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



Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 2 to 15 feet

Spread: 3 to 6 feet

Plant habit: upright

Plant density: open

Growth rate: fast

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

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

Flower

Flower color: red; yellow; orange

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

Pest resistance: very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

Use and Management

As landscape plants, many *Heliconia* species are less desirable because of their spreading nature and the tendency of the leaves to become tattered along the veins by wind. *H. psittacorum* (to 5 feet tall) and its many hybrids (known as

Parakeet Flowers), are frequently used as landscape perennials. However, their aggressive spreading nature requires effective root barriers to keep the rhizomes from extending into areas where the plant is not wanted. *H. caribaea*, well-adapted to alkaline soils, is a tall-grower (to 12 feet) with deep red-bracted inflorescences borne on 2-year-old stems. The many varieties of *H. stricta* rarely grow taller than 3 feet. *Heliconias* as a group impart an unmistakable tropical look to the garden. *Heliconias* can be used as specimen plants, or they can be massed together in groups.

Heliconia species should be grown in full sun to partial shade on a well-drained soil. These perennials have no drought or salt tolerance but will endure wet soils. When these plants are occasionally frozen in the warm parts of Florida, the tops will die back to the ground, but roots will regenerate new shoots with the coming of warm weather.

Propagate the *Heliconia* species by division.

Pests and Management

These species are relatively pest tolerant.