

Heliconias



Heliconia caribea Lamarck cv. **Purpurea**

Heliconias are native to Central and South America and islands of the South Pacific. Heliconias (Family Heliconiaceae), along with Bird-of-Paradise (Family Strelitziaceae), Gingers (Family Zingiberaceae), Costus (Family Costaceae) and Cannas (Family Cannaceae) are relatives of Bananas (Family Musaceae). Many of these closely related plants are grown as ornamentals. Most have large leaves, often with long petioles and large showy flowers commonly with one or more colorful bracts. Most heliconias are well adapted to the humid lowland tropics. They are easy to grow and produce a brilliant show of color. Many cultivars have long lasting flowers which make excellent cut flowers.

Heliconias produce rhizomes (underground stems) and erect shoots (See Fig. 2). The rhizomes branch off and produce new shoots. New branches and shoots develop from buds or eyes on the rhizomes. The shoots are composed of overlapping leaf sheaths which make up the above ground pseudostem and support the large leaf blades and inflorescences (clusters of flowers). Some heliconias have erect leaves with long petioles like bananas (musoid), others have horizontal leaves with short petioles resembling gingers (zingiberoid), some are intermediate with short to medium petioles supporting leaves at about a forty degree angle, like cannas (cannoid). The inflorescences are either erect or pendent with showy bracts containing varying numbers of small flowers.

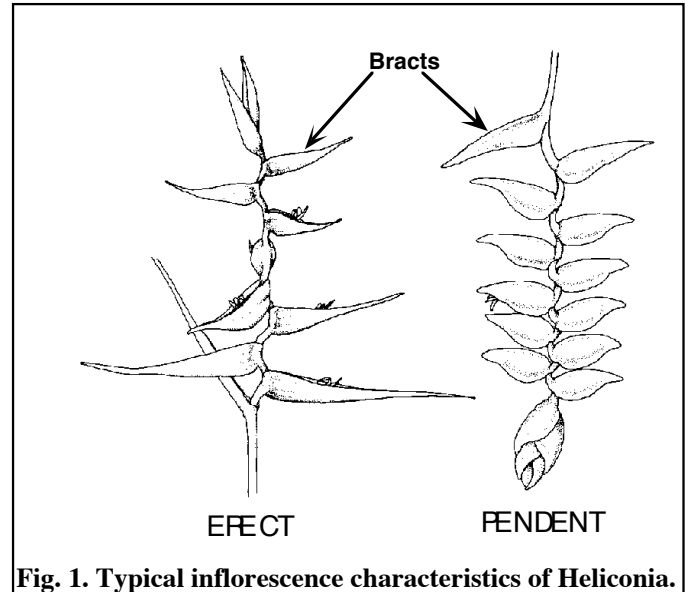


Fig. 1. Typical inflorescence characteristics of Heliconia.

Growing Heliconias

Heliconias like lots of water, well-drained soils rich in organic matter and sunlight. Heliconias do not grow well in standing water. A good growing medium can be made using equal parts soil, wood chip mulch, and peat moss. This mix can be used for starting heliconias in a pot and also can be added to the hole when planting in the ground. Fertilize with a complete garden fertilizer at least every two months. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations. Heliconias grown in alkaline conditions (high pH) will often produce yellow to white new leaves typical of iron deficiency.

Most species of heliconias require lots of space and



Heliconia stricta Huber

can spread across an area in all directions. The larger species such as *H. caribea* can grow to 25 feet in height. When planting, space the rhizomes at least 15 feet apart. Smaller species such as *H. psittacorum* can be planted closer. Allow some open space for it to spread. Dead leaves and old stems that have finished flowering should be removed.

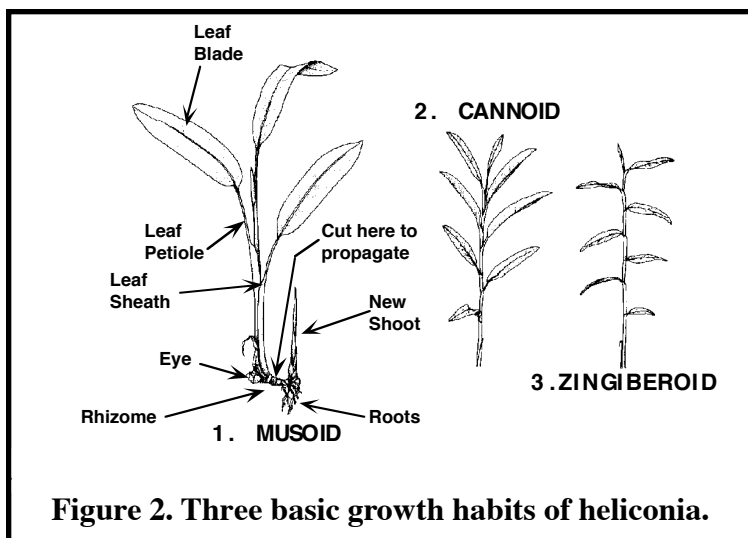
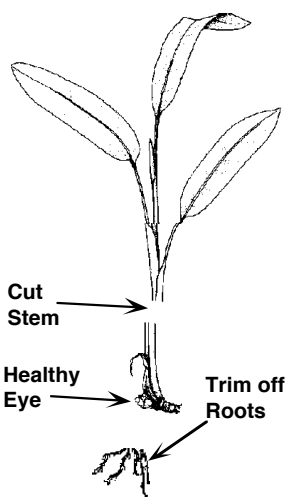


Figure 2. Three basic growth habits of heliconia.

Propagating Heliconias

Heliconias are most easily propagated by dividing the rhizomes. Look at the clump and identify the most recent growths. The most recent growths will have several eyes from which new shoots will develop. Rhizomes are divided by cutting the stem behind a recent growth.



After cutting the rhizome, dig out the growth and cut off the stem, leaving about 1 foot. Make sure that there is a healthy eye on each division. Wash the rhizome and remove the roots. Plant in the smallest pot the rhizome fits in loosely. Place the rhizome in moist soil/organic matter mix. Plant with the eye near the surface of the soil. Place in a shady location, keeping the

soil moist. Transfer to the appropriate light condition for each cultivar after the first leaf has fully expanded.

Pests

The most common pests are mealybugs, scales and nematodes. The mealybugs and scales can be controlled with an insecticidal soap.

Nematodes are small worms that attack the roots. Due to nematode problems, heliconias require replanting every few years from healthy rhizomes. The roots must be removed to prevent the spread of nematodes.



Heliconia hirsuta L.f.

Common Names of Representative Species

Common Name	Species
Parrot's Beak	<i>H. psittacorum</i> 'Rubra'
Giant Lobster Claw	<i>H. caribea</i>
Hanging Lobster Claw	<i>H. rostrata</i>
Small Lobster Claw	<i>H. stricta</i>



Heliconia rostrata Ruiz & Pavon



Heliconia psittacorum L.
f. cv. Rubra

Prepared by James McConnell and Frank J. Cruz,
Horticulturists at the University of Guam