



Cooperative Extension Service  
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## *Heliconia spp.*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The many species of *Heliconia* are rainforest herbs that occur within the understory or densely at the forest periphery (Fig. 1). 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.

### 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 (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

### Description

**Height:** 2 to 15 feet

**Spread:** 3 to 6 feet

**Plant habit:** upright



Figure 1. *Heliconia*.

**Plant density:** open

**Growth rate:** fast

**Texture:** coarse

#### Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate

**Leaf type:** simple

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

**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  
**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

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 Diseases

These species are relatively pest tolerant.