Heliconia caribaea

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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.

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

Description

Height: 10 to 15 feet
Spread: 3 to 6 feet

Figure 1. Caribbean Heliconia.

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  
**Flower characteristic:** spring flowering; summer flowering

**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

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

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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 Helminthosporum leaf spots. Scales and nematodes may also cause problems.

Figure 3. Flower of Caribbean Heliconia