

Heliconias

for Central Florida

Heliconias are a group of herbaceous plants that bear spectacular, brightly colored inflorescences. They are common landscape items in the warmer areas of Florida and throughout the tropics. Widely grown for the florist industry, *Heliconias* are often called “Lobster Claws” because some of the inflorescences resemble a lobster’s claw.

The genus *Heliconia* belongs to the Heliconiaceae Family and is the only genus in the family. There are approximately 200 different species of *Heliconia* with numerous hybrids and cultivars found in cultivation. The Heliconiaceae Family belongs to the order Zingiberales. Other plant families found in this Order (and the closest relatives to the *Heliconias*) include the Musaceae (bananas), Zingiberaceae (gingers), Strelitziaceae (bird-of-paradise) and Cannaceae (cannas). *Heliconias* are native mostly to Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. A few species are native to the South Pacific. *Heliconias* grow from rhizomes on stalks that can range from 1 to 20 feet tall, depending on the species or variety. They have lush, green foliage similar to bananas or cannas. Even when they are not flowering, their lush foliage gives a tropical feel to the landscape. In their native habitats, hummingbirds, bats, or insects pollinate many *Heliconias*.

Some of the species of *Heliconia* make great specimens for the Central Florida landscape. They are easy to grow and virtually pest free. In the landscape, give *Heliconias* a good rich soil. When planting, mix a good amount of organic matter (cow manure, peat, compost,

etc.) into the soil and surrounding areas. Plant the *Heliconia* deeper than it is in the container. This will help with stability of the plant. *Heliconias* often form rhizomes near the surface and our loose, sandy soil tends to allow the stalks to lean or fall over, especially with the added weight during flowering. The smaller species can be planted 2-4 inches deeper than they are growing in the container but the larger ones can be planted up to a foot deeper. *Heliconias* also need to be kept moist, as they are not very drought tolerant. Most *Heliconias* do well with part sun and part shade though some need full shade, depending on the variety. *Heliconias* are also heavy feeders, similar to bananas. Fertilize them 3 to 4 times a year using a good general garden fertilizer, such as a 6-6-6 or 10-10-10

The stalks and foliage of *Heliconias* are cold sensitive and will be damaged or killed back to the rhizomes by temperatures around 30°-32° F. If frozen down, they will grow back from the roots but many will not flower until the following year. Plant them in a protected location. They do well under tree canopy and this helps protect them from frost and freezing

temperatures. Once a *Heliconia* stalk flowers, it will eventually die.

Here at Leu Gardens, we have been growing and experimenting the last few years with different *Heliconias* to find ones suitable for our climate. Here are the ones that we have found suitable for Central Florida.

Some of the smaller *Heliconias* will do well in the landscape or in containers. *Heliconia angusta* ‘Holiday’ is a dwarf variety that only grows 2 –3 feet tall. It bears red inflorescences with white flowers during Christmas time. *Heliconia densiflora* ‘Fire Flash’ is also a smaller plant reaching 3-4 feet tall. It bears reddish-orange inflorescences. *Heliconia psittacorum* has dozens cultivars and several of these are widely available at nurseries and gardens centers. ‘Andromeda’ is a dwarf only growing 1-2 feet tall with orange inflorescences. The others commonly found can reach 3-5 feet tall. These include ‘Lady Di’ with red bracts and yellow flowers, ‘Kathy’ with orangish-red bracts and orange flowers and ‘Strawberries and Cream’ with strawberry-red bracts and pale yellow flowers. Though *Heliconia psittacorum* is commonly available, it is a borderline



Heliconia hirsuta
‘Peru’



plant in our area. It is sensitive to cool weather and usually will go dormant even if it does not freeze. They do not dependably return from the rhizomes in Central Florida but are common enough and sold cheaply that they could be used as annuals. *Heliconia psittacorum* is one of the few that will flower in a single year's growth.

There are many medium sized *Heliconias* that can be grown in our climate. These plants typically grow in the 4 to 6 feet tall range. *Heliconia hirsuta* 'Peru' grows on very slender stems to about 4-5 feet tall. It bears small, reddish-

orange inflorescences. *Heliconia lingulata* has leaves that are large and oval in shape. The inflorescences are bright orangish-yellow. The cultivar 'Fan' is usually seen. 'Spiral Fan' has inflorescences with a spiral arrangement. *Heliconia lingulata* is another species that will bloom on stalks less than a year old. *Heliconia orthotricha* 'Eden Pink' grows 5 to 6 feet tall with pink and white inflorescences. *Heliconia pendula* bears inflorescences that are pendulant or hang down from the plant and grows 5 to 6 feet tall. 'Frosty' is a cultivar with pinkish-red bracts and white flowers. 'Red Waxy' bears red inflorescences. *Heliconia rostrata* is one of the more widely grown *Heliconias* and has one of the most beautiful inflorescences. The bracts are bright red with a bright yellow lip. The flowers are pendulant and are about 12 inches in length. Typically, this *Heliconia* grows 4 to 6 feet tall and is one of the best

Heliconias to grow in Central Florida. *Heliconia schiedeana* is probably the hardiest of all the *Heliconias*. Even the foliage can tolerate slightly lower temperatures before being damaged, usually in the 28-29° F. range. It grows 5 to 6 feet tall with inflorescences that have red bracts and yellow flowers. This *Heliconia* was uncommon but is beginning to be grown by more nurseries and is another excellent species for our climate. *Heliconia spissa* is unusual as it has leaves that naturally divide into segments. The inflorescences have yellow and red bracts with yellow flowers. It grows 4 to 5 feet tall. *Heliconia vaginalis* grows 5 to 6 feet tall. The bracts are red with yellow flowers.

Several varieties of tall *Heliconias* can be grown in Central Florida. This group of *Heliconias* usually grows over 6 feet tall and can reach up to 10 feet in our climate. *Heliconia latispatha* is one that is sometimes seen in local landscapes. There are several cultivars of this species. 'Orange Gyro' bears inflorescences with bright orange bracts. This is usually the cultivar of *Heliconia latispatha* most commonly grown 'Yellow Gyro' has yellow bracts while 'Red-Yellow Gyro' has red bracts with a yellow base.



Heliconia schiedeana

'Distans' is a smaller form with red and yellow bracts and only grows 3-5 feet tall. *Heliconia x pabstii* 'Brazilian Bomber' is a large growing plant that can grow 6-12 feet tall. It is a cross between *H. bihai* and *H. pendula*. The inflorescences are deep red. When they first emerge they are upright but after



Heliconia psittacorum x spathocircinata
'Yellow Parrot'

some time they begin to arch over and hang down. It has also been known as 'Hot Rio Nights' and 'Dmitri Sucre'. *Heliconia x 'Richmond Red'* is a hybrid between *H. caribae* and *H. bihai*. It usually grows over 8 feet tall and bears deep maroon-red inflorescences. There are dozens of other *Heliconia caribae* and *bihai* hybrids. Either of the parents are tender plants that usually won't survive in Central Florida but some of the hybrids seem to have some hardiness.

– Eric Schmidt

FOR MORE INFORMATION

BOOKS:

Heliconia by Fred Berry and W. John Kress, 1991, Smithsonian Institution Press

Tropical Flowering Plants by Kirsten Albrecht Llamas, 2003, Timber Press

The Tropical Look by Robert Lee Riffle, 1998, Timber Press

INTERNET:

Heliconia Society International:
www.heliconia.org