



Heliconia

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Name: *Heliconia* spp. (Heliconiaceae)

Common Name: Heliconia

Origin: Heliconias are tropical herbaceous plants from Central and South America and some islands in the South Pacific.

Distribution: These remarkable plants are grown throughout the tropical and sub tropical regions of the world.

Australian Distribution: Heliconias are commercially grown in the Darwin region of the Northern Territory and in northern Queensland.

Preferred Climate and Soil Types: Most heliconia species do not tolerate cold weather and will suffer injury when temperatures fall below 13°C. The general climatic conditions required for healthy growth are warm and humid. Several varieties of heliconias will grow well in full sun, where others require partial shade. Heliconias prefer freely draining soils with high organic matter.

Description: Heliconia is the only genus in the plant family Heliconiaceae, which is a member of a larger taxonomic category called the order *Zingiberales*. *Zingiberales* includes bananas, gingers, strelitzia (bird of paradise) and cannas. The single genus *Heliconia* has perhaps 250 species with only 180 that have been described so far.

Heliconias are medium to large erect herbs often with extensive rhizomatous growth. Each erect shoot is composed of a stem and leaves usually terminating with an inflorescence. Stem lengths can vary from less than 1 metre to over 5 metres depending on species.

Commercial Cultivars: There are many cultivars of heliconia, which can be broadly divided into two categories – the smaller *Heliconia psittacorum* types and the larger clumping types. Popular *psittacorum* cultivars are Golden Torch, Petra and Halloween. Claw II dominates production of the larger types in the Northern Territory.

Culture: Division of rhizomes is the usual propagation method of heliconias. Not all species set seed, and the seedlings can be variable. Seed is erratic to germinate and seedlings may take 12 months or more to emerge. Propagation by rhizomes is the fastest and most reliable method of cultivation, although there is a risk of transmitting diseases. When selecting planting material the rhizome should be firm and of a white to pink colouring. Discolouration of roots and rhizomes could suggest the presence of bacterial or fungal diseases and nematodes.

Pests and Diseases: Heliconias do not suffer greatly from insect pests in the Northern Territory. The biggest problem is ants chewing the flower

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edges. Birds can also cause damage to the bracts when collecting nectar, and rats are capable of causing flower loss through bite damage.

The main fungal disease in the flower heads is a brown spotting called, *Bipolaris incurvata*, which occurs mainly in the more humid periods. The rhizome or root diseases range from bacterial rots to fungal infections. Cultural practices such as selecting clean planting material, raised beds to allow for free drainage and correct fertiliser and irrigation regimes can prevent the majority of rots.

However there is a serious soil pathogen, Fusarium wilt, which attacks mainly *H.chartacea* and certain cultivars of *psittacorums*. There is no chemical cure for this disease.

Clean planting material or propagation from seed and planting in non-infected soil is the only course of action available to the grower. When harvesting the flowers, sterilising knives between the different varieties helps prevent the spread of this disease between beds.

Flowering Season: *Psittacorums* flower all year with a down period between May to July due to the lower temperatures. Claw II also flowers most of the year whereas other large clumping types are seasonal.

Harvesting: When harvesting the smaller varieties (*H. psittacorum*) the stems are usually cut at ground level in order to encourage more side shoots and allow more light into the beds. The larger varieties are cut according to the desired length of the florists.

Post-Harvest: On farm commonsense post-harvest practices should be used to prolong the vase-life of all tropical flowers. Pick early in the morning and place flowers in water as soon as possible. Pre cool at 13°C to remove field heat for at least one hour before packing the flowers.

References: Berry, F and W. John Kress. Heliconia: An Identification Guide

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