

HOT TROPICS

Let's Talk *Heliconia*

BY ANDREW BRITTEN

What's more tropical than a heliconia bloom? Bring that beauty to your customers with this season-extending crop.

Nothing feels more tropical to me than a stunning heliconia bloom. That isn't quite right; heliconia do flower, but it is tucked away in the bracts that we love so much. I am sure everyone reading this has seen a cut flower arrangement or two with heliconia as the star. Cut heliconia can last up to a month.

Heliconia are in the genus Heliconiaceae, and approximately 200 different species have been cataloged. Most of the heliconia are native to tropical America, but there are some varieties originating from Indonesia to the Pacific Islands.

Heliconia can range in size from 3 feet all the way up to 30 feet. The flowers (bracts) have many variations of color including orange, red, yellow, pink, purple and green, or some combination of these colors. Most of the flowers are pendulous, although there are many that are upright instead. The flowers are tucked away in the bracts so that only specific birds can reach their nectar, predominantly hummingbirds. There is even a hairy variety that is as soft as velvet.

In the nursery trade, the most commonly produced species is the psittacorum. This is because of their smaller size, with upright flowers that are showy in pots and able to be shipped efficiently. They have been a common season extender in tropical areas but have been increasing in popularity throughout North America.

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TIPS FOR GROWING

Heliconia are tropical plants. They do best when night temperatures do not drop below 70° F and humidity stays high. Temperatures below 50° F will send the plants into a dormancy until temperatures consistently stay warm.

Short days are a problem to produce heliconia. In addition to going into dormancy with cold temperatures, short days will do the same. Combine the two and your plants will shut down completely. If you plant heliconia in December through March, all plants will finish the same time as the first ones planted in long days. There are some small exceptions to this in warm winters in deep south Florida, although it cannot be counted on.

Propagation of heliconia is typically done by divisions, starting a new plant with a bib from the mother plant. For nursery production, this bib would first be planted into a small pot (around 4 inches) to root out. The bibs need be misted as they root out with this production method. The plant should be fully rooted in around six weeks. This rooted pot can then be transplanted into the final container and grown to flower. This will take another 12 to 16 weeks,



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depending on the temperatures and the fullness desired of the final crop. Once the plant initiates flowering, it will start to sucker. Each new sucker will grow and flower. Plants will continue this cycle of flowering and getting fuller throughout the summer months.

INNOVATIONS IN PRODUCTION

Recent innovations in the production of heliconia have shortened this crop cycle dramatically. Plants are being produced in clumps offshore in tropical environments and shipped as a washed root clump to North America. These clumps can skip the process of rooting an individual bib under mist and go straight into the finished container. This reduces six weeks off the total crop time and makes the finished pot much fuller as the clumps have multiple bibs from the start. This also allows for a much higher bloom count early on in comparison with the typical production methods.

Some of the most common psittacorum varieties in pot production today are as follows:

- 'Andromeda'
- 'Candy Cane'
- 'Choconiana'
- 'Lady Di'
- 'Petra'
- 'Sharonii'
- 'Strawberries and Cream'

Heliconia typically are grown in partial shade. In production most growers use around 30 percent. This keeps the foliage a nice dark green and the colors of the blooms vibrant. In addition, there are two other varieties that do well in deep shade, 'Jamaica' and 'Rostrata'. In the landscape there are varieties from deep shade to full sun.

Heliconia do face some insect pressures from mealy bugs and mites. The most common disease issues in production are Cercospora, Phytophthora and Rhizoctonia. Good scouting programs can keep any issues that pop up to a minimum.

Work is being done to research production methods to be able to produce the larger heliconia varieties in patio pots. It will be

interesting to see how the results go; we could see a lot more variety in the production of heliconia as a season extender throughout North America.

With proper timing and temperatures, heliconia can be another great season extender

crop. They make great accents in patio combinations or just in the landscape to bring that tropical feel to everyone. I live in Florida and am lucky I can see heliconia in bloom most of the year. Why not bring that feeling to your customers? [gpn](#)

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