



*Root Beer, Lobster*

The variety and splendor of heliconia

*Claw & Sexy Coca*

TEXT BY DAVID THOMPSON | PHOTOS BY JOSHUA McCULLOUGH



“Describing heliconia’s flowers requires leaving behind the botany of petal and stem,” says photographer Josh McCullough, who shot the heliconia seen here at nurseries on Hawai’i Island. The flashy colorful part of the flower isn’t actually the flower at all, but rather a modified leaf known as a bract. The true flowers are small, sprout-like and unassuming. At right, green flowers peep from the deep red bract of a *Heliconia stricta* (common name: Iris Bannachie). On the opening pages, flowers bloom from the multicolored bracts of a *Heliconia bihai* (Aurea). On this page, the pinkish bracts of *Heliconia orthotrica* (Kaile’a).

Easy to grow and spectacular to behold, heliconia have developed an enthusiastic following among horticulturalists, home gardeners and exotic flower lovers around the world. The late Hawai’i Island nurseryman Mark Collins—who traveled the globe in search of new varieties of the large-leaved, splashy-colored ornamental to bring back to Hawai’i—believed heliconia to be “the most provocative of all exotic tropical flowering plants.”

While heliconia are cultivated throughout the tropics, they are first and foremost Americans, having originated in the Amazon and other rainforests and wet areas of South and Central America. From there they headed west, becoming native on some Pacific islands. They don’t grow naturally in the Hawaiian Islands since hummingbirds are their main pollinator and Hawai’i has no hummers. Still, with the help of green-thumbed local residents, they flourish in countless backyards throughout the Islands. Dozens of local nurseries raise them as well, largely for export.

Bearing evocative names such as Raspberry Sherbet, Edge of Night, Perfect Darling, Total Eclipse and Sexy Pink, heliconia come in more than two hundred varieties, with new cultivars appearing regularly. They range in height from a foot and a half to more than twenty feet. Their brilliantly colored inflorescences may barely reach your knees, or they may dangle in long chains from fleshy stalks rising high above your head. Whatever the case, heliconia’s alluring shapes and hues are hard to ignore.



Banana and ginger are cousins of heliconia (which is sometimes called "wild plantain" or "false bird-of-paradise"). Hummingbirds, however, are heliconia's soul mates. The plants have evolved in tandem with the birds so that the flowers form perfect fits for the nectar-sipping beaks. The pollinating hummers are heliconia's genetic engineers, forever creating new wild hybrids. Here, a rare hybrid of *Heliconia vellerigera* known as Red Carpet. Whereas a rhizome from a common heliconia might retail for \$5 to \$10 on the Mainland, a Red Carpet rhizome goes for \$150.



Heliconia's inflorescences contain anywhere from four to thirty bracts. While varying greatly in size, texture and color, the bracts can all be classified as either erect or pendant. Erect bracts are boat-shaped and oriented upward (see opening spread). The bracts of the pendants face downward, such as those of the *Heliconia rostrata* (Ten Day Wonder), seen here. Also known as Lobster Claw, *Heliconia rostrata* has an uncanny resemblance to the pinching end of a certain crustacean.



The Ten Day Wonder (at left) gets its name from the long life of its cut flowers, which last more than a week in a vase. The amber-brown hue of *Heliconia vellerigera* (Root Beer), on this page, gives the plant its common name. But Root Beer's coloration isn't nearly as striking as its fuzziness. Heliconia's texture is either waxy, like Ten Day Wonder, or fuzzy, like Root Beer. Known in botanical terms as pubescence, the fuzz is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. "People either love the hairy ones, or they hate the hairy ones," says Colton Collins, president of the nursery Plant Group Hawaii.



*Heliconia chartacea* has several cultivars, including Sexy Coca, Sexy Scarlet and — the one seen here — Sexy Pink. As one of the most common and popular heliconia, Sexy Pink appears frequently in ikebana and other floral decorations. Like other members of the chartacea family, Sexy Pink has gorgeous inflorescences, but its leaves tatter easily. For this reason you probably won't see it on the neatly kept grounds of a resort hotel. You're more likely to find it in the yards of gardeners who go for vibrant colors and don't mind a few rough edges.