
Large rhizomatous herbs with rhizomes. Leaves distichous, mostly distinctly petiolate, with an open sheath. Inflorescence a terminal, erect or pendent thyrse. Bracts distichous or spirally arranged, often brightly colored, large, boat-shaped, coriaceous, persistent, each enclosing a several-flowered cyme. Flowers tubular. Tepals 6, one of them often reflexed. Stamens 5. Staminode 1, very small. Ovary inferior, 3-locular, placentation axile, ovule 1 per locule. Style 1, stigma 1. Fruit berry-like, 3-seeded, often bluish when ripe. Seeds stony, greyish.

One genus, Heliconia, with over 150 species occurring throughout the Neotropics, with a main centre of distribution in Costa Rica and Panama, and in the foothills of the Andes. In the Reserva Ducke two species of Heliconia are found.

This family can be distinguished from two other families of the large Monocots (Costaceae and Zingiberaceae) by the absence of a ligule, and from Marantaceae by their distinctive inflorescence composed of brightly colored, boat-shaped bracts. The genus Heliconia is much visited and pollinated by hummingbirds.

Key to the species of Heliconia of Reserva Ducke

1. Flowers white; bracts red (sometimes yellow); lower side of leaves with a slightly hairy midrib
   ............................................................................................................. 1. Heliconia acuminata Rich. subsp. occidentalis
1. Flowers orange; bracts green, surface waxy; lower side of leaves glabrous ...... 2. Heliconia psittacorum

   Herbs, 0.5-1.5 m tall. Petiole 5-20 cm long. Leaves narrowly oblong-elliptic, 25-55 cm long, 5-10 cm wide, base acute, apex acuminate, midrib sparsely covered with brownish hairs below. Inflorescence erect, 10-15 cm long. Peduncle 15-25 cm long. Bracts red, 4-5, distichous, horizontally patent, widely spaced, narrowly boat-shaped, basal bract 15-20 cm long, 0.5-1 cm high. Pedicels 1-2 cm long. Flowers white with green sub-apical spot, 4.5-5.5 cm long. Staminode 7-16 mm long. Fruit subglobose, blue, c. 5 mm in diam.

   Upper Rio Orinoco and Rio Negro region, and central and southern Amazon Basin.

   In non-inundated forest, on sandy to clayey soil.

   Flowering and fruiting from April to January.

   Local names: Banana-brava, Bananinha-amarela.

Heliconia acuminata subsp. occidentalis is recognized by its red bracts and white flowers. In this species there is a sparse indument on the midrib of the lower leaf side. Most floral parts are glabrous, but exceptionally some brown hairs are found on bracts and pedicels.

The collection Rodrigues & Lima 2700 has been identified by two Heliconia specialists as belonging to this subspecies. It is aberrant, however, in its larger leaves (to 65×15 cm), yellow bracts and flowers, many-flowered bracts (with up to 25 flowers versus up to 10-flowered in typical material) and by a denser indument on various flower parts.


Herbs, 1-1.5 m tall. Petiole 0-10 cm long. Leaves narrowly oblong-elliptic to linear, 30-60 cm long, 4-6 cm wide, glabrous, base obtuse to acute, apex narrowly acute and acuminate. Inflorescence erect, 5-15 cm long. Peduncle 10-25 cm long. Bracts 4-5, green, surface waxy, distichous, ascending, moderately spaced, narrowly boat-shaped, basal bract 10-15 cm long, c. 0.5 cm high. Pedicels green, 1-2 cm long. Flowers orange, with a greenish spot near the apex, 4-5 cm long, white-tipped, one of the tepals reflexed, glabrous. Staminode 10-12 mm long. Fruit subglobose.

Lesser Antilles and tropical South America.

In non-inundated forest, on clayey soil.

Flowering and fruiting from October to December.
1.XII.1994 (fl) Assunção, P. A. C. L. 109 (INPA);
1.XII.1994 (fl) Costa, M. A. S. 109 (INPA);
22.XII.1995 (fl) Costa, M. A. S. & Assunção, P. A. C. L. 588 (INPA);
29.XI.1976 (fl) Mendonça, S. & Shin, D. 25 (INPA);
14.XII.1995 (fr) Nascimento, J. R. 691 or 1691 (INPA);
10.X.1995 (fl) Ribeiro, J. E. L. S. et al. 1722 (INPA);

Heliconia psittacorum can be recognized by waxy, green bracts and orange flowers.