Heliconiaceae  T. Nakai

This small monocotyledonous family is also referred to as the Lobster Claw Family, Wild Plantain Family or False Bird-Of-Paradise Family. Although the Heliconiaceae contains between 100 and 225 species depending upon the authority cited, it is monogeneric consisting of the single genus Heliconia. These tropical or subtropical evergreen herbs sucker to form shrub or small tree size colonies from rhizomes. Although naturalized in many tropical locations, Heliconia originate predominantly from the New World tropics and a few from Pacific islands in Oceania. Leaves vary in size from 6” to 10’ long, generally resembling those of Musa. Leaves are simple, alternate, more or less paddle or oblong in shape, and have long concave petioles with sheath-like bases that wrap around each other to form a pseudostem. Flowers are quite unique, generally resembling a long pointed canoe, boat or lobster claw with stunning combinations of red, orange, yellow, and green on the showy membranous basal bract. Inflorescences are racemes or spike-like axis of many flowered monochasial cymes with individual flowers or enclosed clusters arising at right angles to the previous flower (cincinnus). Inflorescences are either strongly erect or quickly arching to hang vertically upside-down. Individual perfect flowers are small, inconsequential ornamentally, and enclosed fully or mostly by the showy bract. Flowers have five functional stamens with bilocular anthers and a sixth staminode. The inferior ovary contains three locules. The zygomorphic flowers have three sepals and three petals that are barely differentiated, functioning as tepals. Flowering stalks are polycarpic. Fruit a small, knob-like, one to three-seeded drupes surrounded by a stony endocarp, mostly blue in color, but rarely red or orange, and not ornamental. Heliconia are common tropical landscape plants and are grown for the floral trade. A few are encountered in the landscapes of the immediate Gulf Coast and South Texas portions of our region. Some botanists continue to include the Heliconiaceae within a broader circumscribed Musaceae, the family to which it is most closely related. Other related families include members of the order Zingiberales.

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