Heliconia ‘Hanging Lobster Claw’ (*Heliconia rostrata*)

**Description**

Heliconia rostrata is one of the most recognized and widely grown species, but that doesn't take away from the fact that it is still considered one of the most beautiful. The flower it produces is one of the most colourful you will ever encounter.

Commonly known as hanging lobster claw, this heliconia is of a medium size, about 6-8 feet tall, and has spectacular bright red bracts with yellow tips. Rostrata means "beaked", in reference to the bracts' resemblance to a parrot's beak.

The spectacular flowering bracts can have anything from 8 to 35 sections and are very long.

The mature plant normally starts to flower in the summer. The flowers last for months on the plant and make an excellent cut flower.

It is an easy grower in tropical areas but some room is required because the stalks can reach 8 feet in height.

Bright shade is ideal with good moisture in the air and in the soil, but no soggy soils. Sheltered areas are better because strong winds can shred the leaves pretty badly.

Those of you in not so tropical climate need not be envious, with some work they can be grown in large pots.

It prefers full sun to light shade (about 15% shade).

**Cultivation**

Heliconias come in a range of height and growth habits. Some may only reach 50cm while others may reach 6m in tropical climates.

Heliconias are adapted to full or part sun. Height will tend to increase if the plant is subjected to shade. All heliconias produce an underground rhizome system. Some are very rampant capable of covering significant ground area within a few years, others may be more dense clumping. Rampant growers (runners) are good for large expansive areas. The spread can be controlled by first installing a root barrier into the soil, then planting the heliconia.

Every 3 years or so, the entire clump is dug up and a young division (sucker) is replaced in the hole.

Their requirements are simple: fertile well drained soil, warm humid temperatures and adequate water. They do not like frosts.

All of the eastern coast of Queensland, northern stretches of New South Wales, and most areas of humid Northern Territory and Western Australia are perfect for heliconia growing – the only requirements is selection of the right cultivars.

Heavy mulching is recommended to protect the soil from drying out, and to enhance the soil organic matter. In areas where rainfall in low, additional irrigation is important.

Fertilisers used by home gardeners are generally chicken pellets, although complete fertilizer blends are ideal. The only significant pests for gardeners are grasshoppers, scale and mealybugs. Diseases are rare but wet feet, especially in winter, can rot the root system.

The ‘stem’ is actually made up of rolled leaf bases and the flowers emerge from the top of these pseudostems. Pruning is therefore not advised. Each pseudostem will only flower once, so after flowering it is best to cut that pseudostem out.

**Planting instructions**

*Please plant as soon as possible after you receive the rhizome.*

Your rhizome may have leaves, or the leaves may have been partially or completely removed to aid the plant’s health during travel. If the leaves have been completely removed, the rhizome should still have growing ‘buds’ or new shoots as well as the leaf stem.
The rhizome should be planted with the top (leaf stem/new shoots/buds pointing upwards) no more than 3-4 cm under the soil. New shoots or larger buds should be above the soil. You can often look at the rhizome and see where the soil line had been while it was growing.

**It is very important not to plant the rhizome too deep,** as this will invite fungi and cause root rot. Freshly planted rhizomes need oxygen to grow new roots and will die if the planting medium is too dense or too wet.

After planting, water thoroughly, then do not water again until soil is getting dry. Keep evenly moist, but not wet, when shoots to grow and leaves start to unfold.

If planted in pots, these should be of sufficient size - at least 10 to 15 cm wider than rhizome size. Keep the pots in a warm, sunny place. When leaves start to unfold the plants can be planted out - again in well drained soil.

A slow release fertilizer is ideal in the beginning. Larger and already established plants require more fertilizing and more water.