



Heliconia nutans in Chiriquí, Panamá

By Carla Black, HSPR Member

I am fond of all heliconias, but the native species of Panamá, especially those that grow near where I live, are my favorites. *Heliconia nutans* particularly attracts my attention because of its variety of shapes, sizes, and colors.



This is the size of most *H. nutans* inflorescences. They vary from distichous to spiral, and beyond.

Heliconia nutans is a highland species, growing from 900m elevation to nearly 1900m, with a range of approximately 150km in the western Cordillera Central in Panamá and the southern part of the Cordillera de Talamanca in Panamá and Costa Rica.

The *H. nutans* we are all familiar with from the Berry and Kress book is just one of many forms of the species, some more outlandish than others.

It survives the “severe” weather of open areas on the crest of the continental divide, where the wind whips its foliage for three to four months a year in the dry season; other individuals are lucky enough to enjoy a shady damp spot in the forest. Some forms grow to 4 meters tall, though most are smaller; the plants I have at home average 2 to 3 meters, and those in the wild are smaller. The “standard” delicate form we know from photos shows quite a lot of variation in real life: big or small, distichous, spiral, or twisted, and green or maroon stems.



A healthy clump. In the forest they don't have as many stems, nor do they grow quite as tall.

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Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Sunday, March 11, 2007. Home of José Flores and Sheila Rivera, Hwy. 780, Km. 2.0, Finca Teranova, Villas de Doña Elena, Comerío, PR.

Heliconia nutans in Chiriquí, Panamá (continued)



This photo was sent by a curious neighbor, asking if it could still be *H. nutans*, even with the distinctive feature of so many flowers blooming at the same time in each bract. I have to say yes, though I didn't see the actual plant, since *H. nutans* is quite variable.

The most surprising *H. nutans* is one I call "Twister". For quite a few years it had me confused – it is so different from anything I had seen, or seen pictures of, that I gave it a nickname to be able to refer to it. Twister grows in a well-studied area of Panamá, and right along the highway, so I didn't seriously think it was a new species. In an email correspondence, Dr. Kress called it *H. nutans*. Gosh, this heavy-weight didn't look like any other *H. nutans* I had seen, and I must admit at first I took the hippie advice of the 1970's to "Question Authority". However, as time passed I learned to look inside heliconia bracts, take out individual flowers, and compare hidden details. Finally I was satisfied that Twister was *H. nutans* – though certainly in a strange form! Twister varies almost as much as standard *H. nutans*: it ranges from twisted to contorted, has a red or yellow rachis, and most notably, some plants are a beautiful purple under the leaves and dark green above.

H. nutans begins blooming in December, so I took the opportunity to make a gallery of the plants growing in the yard. Since the size of the plants varies greatly, I enlisted the help

of Yulissa and Wilmer Santos, the children of one of my employees, to provide scale for the photos.

Carla and her husband Angel live in Volcán, Chiriquí, Panamá, and are the owners of the Chichica Garden website (www.heliconiagarden.com).



Some "normal" inflorescences are rather large compared to the individual shown in the Berry and Kress book.

Heliconia nutans in Chiriquí, Panamá
(continued)



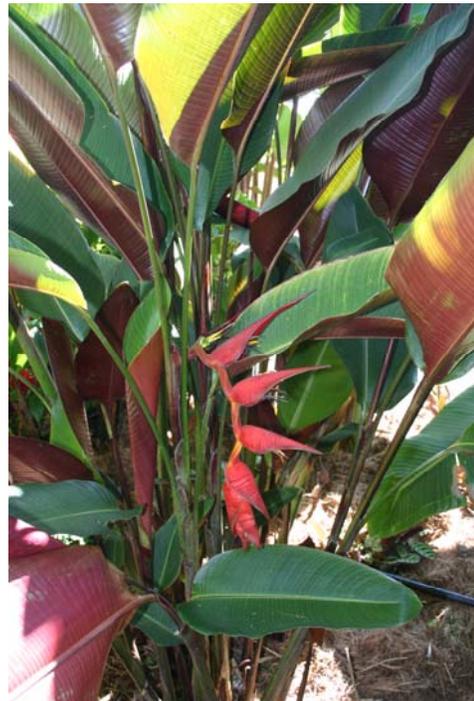
This clump of small contorted *H. nutans* has faded away since I took the picture two years ago. I have learned that this species needs dividing and replanting every couple of years to keep it healthy. The plant is not lost, but isn't strong enough to flower this year. It will probably return on its own, but I will replant a few rhizomes when the rains return.



Taking up a step in size and vigor, this is one of the plants I call Twister. In this case, the leaves are all green, and the inflorescences all red.



I call this one Purple Twister for the color of the underside of the leaves.



Purple Twister is a wonderful foliage plant.

HELICONIA SOCIETY OF PUERTO RICO, INC.

www.heliconiasocietypr.org

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HSPR

*Promoting Zingiberales in
Puerto Rico since 1996.*

The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.

President's Corner

We wish to express our deep gratitude to Bryan and Yarisa Brunner for hosting our December, 2006 HSPR meeting at their beautiful farm in Maricao. Unfortunately nature decided to “dampen” our joyous occasion with heavy and constant rain showers almost all afternoon. We had to postpone Carmen Iris Ruiz’s demonstration on flower arranging until our next meeting and then move everyone into a small crowded covered porch area, next to the house, for the raffle and lunch. In spite of the inclement weather, and the fact that we were not able to tour Bryan and Yarisa’s fabulous plant collections, we all had a great time.

Carmen Iris has graciously agreed to give us another presentation on Flower Arranging at our next meeting on Sunday, March 11, that will be held at the farm of José Hiram Flores and Sheila Rivera. Directions on how to get to their farm will be included with this newsletter.

We hope that every member of HSPR will attend our March meeting and bring plants for our raffle and to sell. These two activities enable all of us to enlarge our Zingiberales collections at a very reasonable cost and are always great fun.

As mentioned at our last meeting, we wish to express our deep appreciation to Bryan Brunner and Bob Castro for turning out such a beautiful HSPR Newsletter. It is really “First Class”. Thanks, guys!

Please begin to talk up our 2nd Sunday in June “Meet the Experts Lecture Series” with EVERYBODY THAT YOU KNOW. Let’s get a great turnout for a great lecturer with great slides—Bruce Dunstan from Australia.

Ray Jerome
President, HSPR



Carla Black’s assistant, Yulissa, showing a contorted inflorescence of Twister. The same plant produces various levels of twisting in different inflorescences. Read more about the diversity of *Heliconia nutans* in Panamá starting on page 1.