



# A Windshield Survey of *Heliconia latispatha*: The Wonder Weed

*By Carla Black, Member HSPR*

Heliconias aren't very popular in Panama. I lay the blame squarely on the spiraling bracts of *H. latispatha*. It covers hectares of territory stretching the length of the country along the Interamerican Highway. It blankets entire hillsides with hardly a shrub to interrupt its invasive march. It thrives in full sun and is not deterred by shade. And by the end of dry season it looks as if a great blow-dryer set on high heat had been trained on it for months, reducing the foliage to brown and yellow tatters. Why on earth should anyone plant weeds? In Central America, heliconias, and especially *H. latispatha*, have to overcome our fickle gardeners' rejection of everything ordinary.



'Red-Yellow Gyro' type of *Heliconia latispatha* common in Central America.

But when Angel and I looked more closely at our most common heliconia, we saw diversity rivaled perhaps only by the bihais or strictas. We like collecting heliconias in the wild; there is something about coming across a species new to us



Carla's distichous *Heliconia latispatha*.

in its native habitat which can't compare to shopping in nurseries or raiding a friend's collection. The abundance of Panamanian species is what sparked our interest in heliconias, and our ever-hopeful scanning of the roadside as we drive is what led to our discovery of a multitude of forms of *H. latispatha*. I use the word "discovery" lightly; these latispathas are generally well-known.

The 'Red-Yellow Gyro' type is the most common of all the latispathas in the areas where we drive. That includes Panama west of the capital, Costa Rica excluding the Atlantic coast, western Nicaragua, and less frequently, western Honduras and El Salvador. I can hardly imagine there is any other single heliconia more common than the 'Red-Yellow Gyro' type. It seems ubiquitous, in somewhat varying shades of red and yellow, but clearly the same type. We see it most often at or near sea level, though it

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## Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 9:30 am, Sunday, June 13, 2004. Conference Room, Mayaguez Zoo, Mayaguez, PR.
- Heliconia Society International Conference, August 3-7, 2004, San Juan, PR.

## A Windshield Survey of *Heliconia latispatha*: The Wonder Weed (continued)

also does well when transplanted to a shady spot at our house at 1300 meters elevation.

So it isn't surprising that the one distichous *latispatha* we have come across is a "Red-Yellow" type. The "freak" clump is growing alongside normal *latispathas*, leaving no doubt it is the same species. This was a very exciting find for us, not just in terms of expanding the range of cultivated heliconias. The bushmaster lurking amongst the stems added immeasurably to the thrill! Bushmasters are called "dos pasos" in Panama. I always thought the name referred to how far you would get after being bitten, but the two steps might be the lightning-fast ones you take in reverse when you see the huge serpent! We brought a rhizome home, in spite of the portent, and will have to wait a year longer to see if this plant comes true as distichous. I have my cultivar name all picked out if it does!



*Heliconia latispatha* 'Spotch'

Many of the natural variations in *H. latispatha* are based on red and yellow. A nice one is all red. We have seen it in great numbers in two areas of lowland Costa Rica. One rhizome we brought home is blooming for the first time, but it is not turning out all red here. It appears that the soil conditions or other local factors influence the color. But, like a good collector, I'll keep it; I could even try some soil amendments to see if it will turn red again.

Spotched red and yellow is another variation on the theme. My speckled *latispatha* was one of the very first I brought home about 6 years ago, and I don't have either a collection record of it, nor a recollection of its collection location.

As indicated by its presence in the Berry and Kress book, the 'Orange Gyro' type is probably the next most common *latispatha*, and also a strikingly pretty one, due to its orange sherbet bracts and bright green rachis. We have seen it most often at about 1000 meters elevation, near the continental divide, where the dry season is not as pronounced as on the Pacific slope. The clumps are invariably smaller and more widely scattered than those of the 'Red-Yellow Gyro' type.

The third *latispatha* in the Berry and Kress book is 'Distans'. I assume it is included because of its intriguing small size. 'Distans' is not common in the wild in southern Central America, but we were fortunate to see it both in the wild and as an ornamental near San Salvador in El Salvador. The elevation was about 700 meters, and Distans was in 80% shade, in contrast to 'Red-Yellow Gyro' which is most at home in full sun. Need I mention that we tucked a rhizome behind the seat of the truck and smuggled it across four international borders?

My favorite *latispatha* for the moment is one I call 'Pistachio' for lack of a proper name. If you shop for heliconias on Ebay (heaven forbid), you might have seen this one. We collected it alongside the highway, high (about 1200 meters elevation) on the damp Atlantic slope of Poas Volcano in central Costa Rica. The distinguishing feature is its bright green rachis which contrasts beautifully with the bright yellow and red of the bracts. My happiest plant is easily 20 feet tall, with huge inflorescences to match 15 feet off the ground. The plant is non-invasive and grows in the attractive vase shape of heliconias which do not spread. The stems are spotched and the youngest ones are covered with a white waxy coating. Now that I mention these features which are unusual in *latispatha*, I wonder if it is a natural hybrid?

But there's the fickle gardener in me again, wishing for anything but our common weed, *Heliconia latispatha*.

## A Windshield Survey of *Heliconia latispatha*: The Wonder Weed (continued)



*Heliconia latispatha* 'Pistachio'

New members Carla Black and Angel Rodriguez live and garden in Volcán, Panamá. You can visit their website at: [www.volcanbaru.com](http://www.volcanbaru.com). (All photos by the author.)

## The HSPR Website

By Bryan Brunner, HSPR Webmaster

Our website is finally online! You can check it out at <http://heliconiasocietypr.org>. For now, the address must be typed in to your browser's address bar, as the site is so new it hasn't been indexed by the search engines yet.

Please give me your comments, suggestions and criticism of the website and its content... this is YOUR website, and I hope that everyone will participate in its creation. This is only the beginning!

Future plans include the addition of more HSPR newsletters, a list of our members (with contact information for those who desire to have it posted), and an extensive photo gallery of heliconias, gingers, costus, bananas, birds of paradise and other Zingiberales. I welcome your high quality digital photos to include in the photo galleries (credit will be given to the photographer).

Let's make the HSPR website a world-class source of information for heliconias and other Zingiberales!

### HSPR Website Home Page

**HSPR**

Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc.

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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.



Our native *Heliconia caribaea*

We meet four times per year, in March, June, September and December, at member's homes and farms. Highlights of our meetings are conferences on different aspects of heliconias and other Zingiberales, and our plant raffle.



Tour of HSPR member's farm

We also publish a quarterly newsletter, and welcome contributed articles, stories and photographs. Annual membership dues are \$20 for families, \$15 for individuals, and \$10 for students.



Marin Alto Tropicals heliconia display at the Aibonito Flower Festival

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# HSPR

*Promoting Zingiberales in  
Puerto Rico since 1996.*



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## Classified Ads

With this newsletter we are trying something new that has been discussed several times at past meetings. We are offering the opportunity for HSPR members to have one free classified ad per newsletter, to announce or sell goods and services related to heliconias or other Zingiberales, gardening, and similar areas.

Ads should be 30 words or less. Additional ads for members or advertisements by non-members of HSPR are \$10 each. Please contact the Editor for more information. Ads must be submitted by email or fax to the Editor by the 15th of February, May, August or November to be included in the following issue of the HSPR Newsletter.

Here are some examples of advertisements:

**Ray Jerome** — Magnificent documentary DVDs, approximately 1 hour each, \$10 plus \$5 S/H. "Heliconias #1: Pendant and Bihai Heliconias", and "Heliconias #2: Orthotricha and Stricta Heliconias". Call Ray at 787-886-3147.

**Montoso Gardens** — Large selection of heliconias, gingers, ornamental bananas and other Zingiberales. Visit our farm in Maricao (787-221-0614), or visit our website at: <http://www.montosogardens.com>

**Vivero Anones** — Tropical fruit trees, heliconias, ornamental gingers, and palms for sale. Excellent prices. Send email to [viveroanones@hotmail.com](mailto:viveroanones@hotmail.com) or call 787-827-3121.

## President's Corner

Our last meeting was graciously hosted by Bari and Amelia Villanueva at their beautiful farm in Rio Grande. We are very grateful to them for their kindness and generosity. In attendance we had 31 members and six visitors. The food was great, but the garden tour was brief as it was interrupted by rain showers. I presented a talk on our heliconia expedition into the Amazon jungles of northern Peru. There was a discussion of the HSI Conference next August and the question arose as to whether members of HSI were to have any benefits from belonging to HSI. I talked to Endre Guttman and he informed me that general admission is \$240 and that admission for HSI members is \$200, a discount of \$40, which amounts to the HSI membership fee. We also briefly discussed whether we wanted to be more aggressive in obtaining new members for our society, possibly by newspaper, or even radio announcements, or if we merely wanted to continue as we are doing now. Please think about these considerations and we will discuss it at our next meeting.

We all had great fun and enjoyed the delicious food at our last meeting. We look forward to doing the same at our next meeting, which will be held in the Conference Room of the Mayaguez Zoo. It is a spacious, air conditioned room with plenty of chairs. At the zoo entrance, members should identify themselves as belonging to HSPR, and will receive a 50% discount off the entrance fee (\$3 instead of the regular price of \$6 for adults).

We can bring plants for the raffle as usual, PLUS additional plants in pots to donate to the zoo's heliconia collection. We are NOT allowed to sell plants there, or bring alcoholic beverages. Thank you for your cooperation.

Best wishes always,

Ray Jerome