



FALSE UNICORN ROOT (HELONIAS)

(*Chamaelirium luteum*, *Helonias dioica*, *Veratrum luteum*)

Family: Liliaceae or Melanthiaceae

Synonyms: Blazing Star, Devil's Bit, Fairywand, Starwort

| Plant characteristics | |
|---|---|
| <p>Helonias (False Unicorn) is a perennial herb growing in rich, moist woods, thickets, and meadows in the eastern U.S. (1-3). Stem is smooth and simple with alternate leaves, growing 1-3 feet tall out of a basal whorl of smooth, oblong leaves (2). False Unicorn flowers from May-July with clusters of yellowish flowers on long drooping spikes (1). Male flowers have stamens longer than the petals with terminal, 2-lobed anthers. Female flowers have linear petals with ovate ovaries. The herb bears numerous capsule-shaped fruit (4).</p> <p>Helonias prefers partial to full shade and acidic soil. Growers harvest 4-6 year old roots and dry them for medicinal use (3).</p> | |
| Herb chemical constituents and properties | |
| <p>Biologically-active chemicals: steroid saponins, including chamaelirin, helonin, and aglycone diosgenin (5).</p> <p>Herbal properties: uterine tonic, diuretic, antihelminthic, emetic, emmenagogue (1, 6).</p> | |
| How herb used traditionally | How used today (based on scientific evidence) |
| <p>Native Americans used Helonias prior to European settlement and the Eclectic physicians used it as a tonic to strengthen the female reproductive organs, especially the uterus. A physician would prescribe Helonias for a woman complaining of irritability, general weakness, and lower abdominal or back discomfort (6). The goal of treatment for the woman was balancing of her reproductive function, especially in conditions of laxity (7, 8). A pregnant woman might take it for vomiting or to prevent spontaneous abortion. Helonias may smooth the transition to menopause or as treatment for other problems with menstruation (5-7).</p> <p>Eclectic physicians also used Helonias as a diuretic, to treat strangury (slow, painful, spasmodic urination), jaundice, stomach paralysis, and kidney inflammation associated with depression (6). A Thomsonian practitioner, Dr. Sweet, put together a combination of herbs known as <i>Mother's Cordial</i>. The preparation, which is still used today, contains 4 parts partridge berry (<i>Mitchella repens</i>), to one part each of false unicorn root (<i>Chamaelirium luteum</i>), blue cohosh (<i>Caulophyllum thalictroides</i>), and cramp bark (<i>Viburnum opulus</i>) (6).</p> | <p>Researchers have not studied False Unicorn Root in humans as of yet- no scientific studies are available.</p> <p>Herbalists today may combine Helonias root with chaste berry (<i>Vitex agnus castus</i>) and St. John's wort (<i>Hypericum spp.</i>) as a uterine tonic (7, 8).</p> <p>Preparation and Dosage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decoct 1-2 g (1-2 tsp) of the dried root in a cup of water (simmer gently for 10-15 minutes) and drink three times daily (8) Take 2-5 ml (1/2-1 tsp) of the 1:5 strength tincture or 1-2 ml of the fluid extract (1:1 strength) three times daily (9) |

| Safety issues | Consumer marketing issues |
|---|---|
| <p>Side effects: nausea and vomiting at high doses (9)</p> <p>Adverse events: None known.</p> <p>Precautions/contraindications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not recommended in pregnancy (10) • Safety in childhood not established • Use cautiously with inflammation of the stomach and/or intestines (10) | <p>False Unicorn Root garnered \$700,000 in sales in 2001. Wildcrafters harvested 13,500 pounds of root which sold for \$35-50 per pound (11).</p> <p>The plant is well-suited for cultivation in the central regions of North Carolina. Demand for the root is expected to remain strong (11).</p> |

References

1. Foster, S. & Duke, J. (2000) *A Field guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America* (Houghton Mifflin, New York).
2. Grieve, M. (1971) *A Modern Herbal* (Dover Publications, Inc, New York).
3. Strategic Reports (2002.) (North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC), pp. 244 pp.
4. Gruenwald, J., Brendler, T., Jaenicke, C. & Mehtoa, M. (1998) (Medical Economics Company, Inc., Montvale, NJ).
5. Haughton, C. (2003) in *Herb Profiles*, ed. Haughton, C. (Purple Sage, Vol. 2004).
6. Boyer, W. E. (1998) *Medical Herbalism: A Clinical Newsletter for the Herbal Practitioner* **10**, 10-14.
7. Mills, S. & Bone, K. (2000) *Principles and Practice of Phytotherapy* (Churchill Livingstone, Philadelphia).
8. Hoffman, D. (1990) *The New Holistic Herbal* (Element, Boston, MA).
9. Jellin, J. M., Gregory, P. J., Batz, F. & Hitchens, K. (2004) (Therapeutic Research Faculty, Stockton, CA), Vol. 2004.
10. Brinker, F. (1998) *Herb contraindications and drug interactions* (Eclectic Medical Publications, Sandy, Oregon).
11. Davis, J. & Greenfield, J. (2003) (North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC), pp. 243.