



FALSE UNICORN ROOT (HELONIAS)

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

Family: Liliaceae or Melanthiaceae

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

Key Clinical Points	
❖ Little scientific research has been published on false unicorn root with no clinical trials.	
Key Constituents and pharmacology	
False Unicorn Root contains steroid saponins, including chamaelirin, helonin, and diosgenin aglycone. ¹ Current animal/in vitro research focuses on its efficacy in treatment of prostate cancer. ²	
Herbal properties: uterine tonic, diuretic, antihelminthic, emetic, emmenagogue. ^{3,4}	
History and traditional use	Indications supported by clinical trials
<p>Native Americans employed false unicorn root prior to European settlement. The Eclectic physicians used Helonias root 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 lumbar heaviness/ discomfort.³ The goal of treatment for the woman was balancing of her reproductive function, especially in conditions of laxity.^{5,6} A pregnant woman might take it for vomiting or to prevent spontaneous abortion. Helonias may smooth the transition to menopause, treat leucorrhea, amenorrhea, or ovarian dysmenorrhea.^{1,3,5} 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.^{5,6}</p> <p>Eclectic physicians also used Helonias as a diuretic, to treat strangury (slow, painful, spasmodic urination), jaundice, atonic dyspepsia, and nephritis associated with depression.³ A Thomsonian practitioner, Dr. Sweet, put together a combination of herbs known as Mother's Cordial, using water and alcohol extractions. 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>).³</p>	<p>There are no published clinical trials of false unicorn root for any indication.</p> <p>Preparation and Dosage: 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.⁶ Or 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).⁷</p>

Interactions with other herbs, pharmaceuticals, disease states	Adverse effects/precautions/side effects/contraindications
<p>Interactions with pharmaceuticals: None known.</p> <p>Interactions with other herbs: None known.</p> <p>Precautions/contraindications: Emmenagogues are generally thought to be contraindicated in pregnancy.⁸ Traditional herbalists recommend the herb for threatened abortion, however.⁶ As false unicorn root can cause gastric irritation, it should be used cautiously in individuals with gastrointestinal inflammation.⁸</p>	<p>Side effects: nausea and vomiting at high doses.⁷</p> <p>Adverse events: None known.</p>
<p>Botanical characteristics</p>	
<p>Helonias (False Unicorn) is a perennial herb growing in rich, moist woods, thickets, and meadows in the eastern U.S.^{4,9,10} Stem is smooth and simple with alternate leaves, growing 1-3 feet tall out of a basal whorl of smooth, oblong leaves.⁹ False Unicorn flowers from May–July with clusters of yellowish flowers on long drooping spikes.⁴ 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.¹¹ Helonias prefers partial to full shade and acidic soil. Growers harvest 4-6 year old roots and dry them for medicinal use.¹⁰</p>	

References

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