



SKULLCAP

(*Scutellaria lateriflora*)

Family: Labiatae family (mint)

Synonyms: Scullcap, Mad-dog weed, Madweed (1), helmet flower, Hood-wort (2), Blue Pimpernel, Quaker Bonnet (3), blue skullcap (4)

Plant characteristics	
<p>Grows up to 3 feet tall, spreads readily. Leaves are toothed ovate to lanceolate, with paired blue flowers just above the leaves on one side of the slender, square branching stem (2,5). The seed pods look like little lipped bells (1) or "caps". The plant is native to North America, perennial and hardy to Zone 4. It thrives in fertile soil with plenty of water in partial shade or full sun (5). For peak medicinal activity, the entire herb above ground should be harvested when it begins to flower in the summer and then dried in the shade (5).</p>	
Herb chemical constituents and properties	
<p>Biologically-active chemicals: volatile oils, tannins, and flavonoids, compounds that reduce binding to a serotonin receptor in the brain which may have an effect on sleeplessness, depression, migraine, pain, and memory loss (6). The specific biochemistry of this herb is still under investigation. Current studies suggest that it has an effect similar to anti-anxiety drugs such as Valium without the side effects of decreased attention (4).</p> <p>Herbal properties: nervine tonic, sedative, antispasmodic (7).</p>	
How herb used traditionally	How used today (based on scientific evidence)
<p>Known to indigenous Americans (2) and early colonial doctors as a treatment for rabies (8). Subsequently used to treat a variety of nervous complaints, including "female weakness" (8), epilepsy and uncontrollable movements (7). Was in <i>The United States Pharmacopeia</i> from 1863-1916 and in <i>The National Formulary</i> until 1947.</p> <p>Preparation and dosage: Traditionally administered as a tea (1-2 grams in 1 cup of boiling water three times daily) or an alcohol-based tincture (1/2- 1 teaspoon of a 1:3 strength tincture three times daily) (9).</p>	<p>Little scientific evidence to support use despite long and continued use of the herb by herbalists. A small 2003 clinical trial showed that skullcap significantly reduced anxiety in healthy volunteers, with a peak effect at one hour (4).</p> <p>Has been used to treat stroke, fever, elevated cholesterol, atherosclerosis, epilepsy, hysteria, nervous tension, allergies, dermatitis, inflammation, and spasms (3).</p> <p>Michael Tierra, L.Ac., O.M.D. successfully treats alcohol and drug withdrawal with skullcap (7).</p>

Safety issues	Consumer marketing issues
<p>Some herbalists say that large doses can cause dizziness, confusion and palpitations (9). Doctors have reported incidents of liver toxicity in patients taking a combination of drugs and herbal preparations containing skullcap and other herbs. It is not clear if the liver damage was due to the skullcap, the other drugs and herbs, a contaminant in the herbal preparation, or a combination of factors. Skullcap has not been clearly implicated as a cause of severe side effects (4,8,9). Dr. Low Dog recommends that doctors check liver function blood tests in patients who take large doses of skullcap over long periods so that they will be sure that skullcap has no adverse effects (9).</p> <p>Skullcap's safety in pregnancy and breast-feeding is unknown. We do not know if certain people with other illnesses should not take skullcap. We do not know if skullcap interacts with medications, though we suspect it would cause a greater effect of any drug capable of causing drowsiness like Ativan, Valium, and, perhaps, Prozac, as well as antihistamines and alcohol.</p> <p><i>Likely safe, effectiveness uncertain</i></p>	<p>People who gather skullcap must be very careful that they are picking the correct species. The liver toxicity described to the left in many cases seems to be due to the substitution of wild germander for skullcap. Farmers must be careful to buy seeds from a reputable source. About 200 species of skullcap exist, but only 3 species are medicinal and each of those have different characteristics (4). Farmers will want to make sure they are growing <i>Scutellaria lateriflora</i>, blue skullcap.</p> <p>Skullcap is gaining in popularity in the medicinal herb markets in Europe and Asia and supplies have gradually increased to meet the demand. In 2001, prices ranged from \$4-8/lb. and 35,000lbs. were harvested. Demand should continue to increase with the decrease in the popularity of alternative herbs. Skullcap products sold for around \$190,000 in 2001 (10). Skullcap grows well in NC in areas of constant moisture, such as moist thickets or marshlands (10).</p>

References

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