

20. *ALETRIS FARINOSA* L. (HAEMODORACEAE) — Unicorn Root, Star Grass, Colic Root

An old Amerindian drug that has become world renowned, at least as a folk medicine. Reported to be carminative, cathartic, diuretic, emetic, narcotic, purgative, sedative, stomachic, and vermifuge; unicorn root is a folk remedy for ague, amenorrhea, anasarca, backache, chlorosis, colic, dysmenorrhea, dyspepsia, fever, hysteria, rheumatism, sore, stomachache, uteral prolapse, uterosis, and vaginal prolapse.<sup>2 19 32 33</sup> Grieve states that it proves of great use in cases of habitual miscarriage. Known as colic root because used for colic and ague root because used for rheumatism, often called ague in Colonial days; unicorn root is still taken for rheumatism, often in alcohol, in Appalachia. Amerindians valued unicorn root for narcotic, stomachic and tonic virtues. Catawbas placed leaves in water for colic, dysentery, and other stomach disorders. Cherokee used the root for colic, constipation, cough, fever, jaundice, lung ailments, rheumatism, and strangury; the root was believed to strengthen the womb and prevent abortion.<sup>43</sup>

Contains a saponin, with aglycone diosgenin ( $C_{27}H_{42}O_3$ ), essential oil, a resin, alkaloids, and starch. Containing diosgenin, it is no wonder that the root shows estrogenic activity.

**Toxicity** — Narcotic,<sup>2</sup> small doses induce colic (hypogastric), stupefaction, and vertigo.