

False Hellebore

Veratrum californicum

Other Common Names: veratrum, wild corn, cow cabbage, California corn lily, California false hellebore

Species Affected: cattle, sheep, & goats in particular; wildlife

Description: False hellebore is a robust perennial in the lily family. It reaches heights of up to 6.5 feet. Yellow-green leaves are most dense at the base of the plant, point upwards, and measure up to 12 inches long by 6 inches wide. The plant grows as a single, unbranched stalk, flowering in cream-colored blooms at the top. Seed pods turn black when ripe.

Growing Location and Timing: Primarily an alpine and subalpine plant, false hellebore is an annual which grows in dense stands near streams, in moist mountain meadows and on damp hillsides at elevations between 6,000 and 11,000 feet. It is found across the western U.S. It emerges as soon as snow melts in the spring, flowers in July and August, and sets seed in late August and September. Reproducing via mast seeding, false hellebore communities typically produce large quantities of seed only once every few years, with comparatively few seeds produced in off years.

Toxin: False hellebore contains a range of toxic substances called steroidal alkaloids (including ones called “cycloamine” and “cycloposine” because they cause birth defects in livestock including single-eyed skull deformities)

Toxic Plant Parts: All parts of the plants are toxic, but the roots are 5 – 10 times more toxic than leaves and stems. Toxicity decreases as the plant matures.

Possible Effects on Livestock: Feeding on false hellebore causes two categories of effects: poisoning and birth defects. Poisoning may occur within as little as two hours after an animal eats the plant, and the threshold for poisoning can be as low as 150 grams of plant material ingested. Poisoned animals may exhibit symptoms such as: excessive salivation, problems walking, vomiting, irregular heartbeat, shallow breathing, convulsions or coma.

Pregnant ewes who eat false hellebore on the 14th day of pregnancy give birth to lambs with a variety of skull deformities including cyclopia. If it is ingested later during gestation, it can cause abortion or other deformities.

Preventative Measures: Poisoned animals can be treated with epinephrine. Livestock should be kept away from false hellebore during/after breeding. Herbicidal control may be needed to curb false hellebore populations in rangeland.

Resources: [False Hellebore \(Veratrum californicum\) : USDA ARS](#)

[Review: Veratrum californicum Alkaloids - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

[Veratrum Californicum - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics](#)

[California Corn Lily, Veratrum Californicum \(americansouthwest.net\)](#)



Leaves of false hellebore may measure 9 to 12 inches long and 3 to 6 inches broad. Cream-colored flowers grow in clusters at the top of a single unbranched stalk in a way that resembles corn. Seed pods turn black as they ripen.

Picture Source: USDA



Picture source: [Paul Slichter - Halley Hosting](#)