

SNEEZEWEED/HELEN'S FLOWER

Helenium autumnale and *H. flexuosum*

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A cosmopolitan plant of great beauty both in the perennial border and the wild garden, sneezeweed likes rich, moist soil in full sun. A long-bloomer from early to late autumn, some isolated plants are still producing flowers in November. Cut back in early spring for shorter plants, and in the fall as well. Sneezeweed benefits from division every two to three years; this plant does well in containers, with light applications of fertilizer during active growth. In warm winters the plants have evergreen basal rosettes serving as groundcover. The spherical yellow seed heads provide winter interest in the arden and are a welcome addition to floral arrangements.

About 40 species of this genus are native to North and South America. *Helenium flexuosum*, blooming in late spring/summer, and *H. autumnale*, a fall bloomer, are widely distributed over Virginia. Sneezeweed grows 2-5 feet tall with abundant daisy like flower heads with prominent pincushion-like centers. The rays of both species are yellow, the center is also yellow in *H. autumnale* and in *H. flexuosum* it is usually reddish. Hybrids appear in autumn colors of golden yellow, flame



red, orange, russet. The rays are turned back, and there are 3 scallops at the tip of each ray; the centers can be very dark to deep red to chartreuse, depending upon the cultivar.

The Latin name refers to Helen of Troy; one story reports these flowers springing up where her tears fell upon the death of Hector. The name, "Sneezeweed," doesn't refer to the pollen, but to the plants past use as snuff. ❖