

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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If you have horsetail growing in your garden, getting rid of it could become a life's work, depending on the size of the patch.

The horsetail family, Equisetaceae, has survived for more than 200 million years. It is a very tough and persistent plant. In the Paleozoic age, horsetail and its relatives grew to the size of gigantic 60 foot trees. The bodies of these giants, along with those of other ancient plants, formed the material for the fossil fuel, coal.

Horsetail is easily recognized by its succulent, hollow, jointed stems. Some stems are tan or flesh color, lacking branches, and have a cone-like structure at the tip which produces thousands of reproductive spores. Other stems are green and have whorls of slender branches at the joints, giving it a brush-like appearance. They are sometimes called "scouring rushes" because the stems may become encrusted with minute particles of transparent silica. The pioneers used the plants to scour pots and pans. It has also been reported that European cabinet makers used the abrasive horsetail to polish wood.

Horsetail reproduces and spreads to new areas by emitting clouds of spores that are carried by the wind. As the spores develop into new plants they send branches down into the soil. Horizontal rootstocks develop at 12-inch intervals. This profuse and deep root system can extend the borders of an established patch of horsetail. If root segments are broken off and scattered they begin to grow into new patches. They are usually found in wet or moist areas, but once established they can grow equally well in moderately dry areas.

Horsetail is poisonous to animals, particularly horses, when eaten in large quantities. Cows and sheep do not seem to be as adversely affected. Lasting control of this weed is difficult to achieve because of the high level of food reserves stored in the roots. You will be better served to take an integrated approach by using many methods of control. It is helpful to cut and destroy the stems before spores develop. Persistent removal of horsetail tops about 3 weeks after emergence for 3 or 4 years should give good control. This plant cannot tolerate much shading, so use of synthetic ground covers or shading material can be effective. Bark, sawdust, or similar mulches are not effective. Few herbicides provide lasting results. Check with the WSU Extension Office for specific recommendations in the latest Pacific Northwest Weed Control handbook.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.