

Don't Horse Around with Horsetail

By Jason Miller
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Perennial weed is poisonous to animals, tough to eradicate

Like most Skagit County gardeners, I have common horsetail growing in my yard, taunting me with feathery fronds that resemble its namesake. 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.

Horsetail is a tough, persistent plant that's difficult to control. The horsetail family, Equisetaceae (genus *Equisetum*), 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 60-foot trees. The bodies of these giants, along with those of other ancient plants, formed the material for the fossil fuel coal.

The genus is near-cosmopolitan, being absent only from Australasia and Antarctica. In other words, when it comes to horsetail, we gardeners can run, but we cannot hide. If you're in Japan, though, don't be surprised to see it cooked and placed on a plate for your meal.

Horsetail is easily recognized by its succulent, hollow, jointed stems. Some stems are tan or flesh-colored, 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 minuscule particles of transparent silica. The pioneers used the plants to scour pots and pans. It has also been reported that European cabinetmakers 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 (and ironically) to 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. If you persistently remove the tops of horsetails about three weeks after they emerge, for three or four years, you should get good control.



Left: Horsetail is easily recognized by its succulent, hollow, jointed stems. **Center:** Horsetail stems often are green and have whorls of slender branches at the joints, giving it a brush-like appearance. **Right:** Horsetails that are tan or flesh-colored and lack branches have a cone-like structure at the tip, which produces reproductive spores. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

It is said that this plant cannot tolerate much shading, so consider using synthetic ground covers or shading material, although, I must add, my horsetail grows just fine in an area that gets only about three months of sun per year. Bark, sawdust or similar mulches are not effective. Few herbicides provide lasting results.

For detailed, up-to-date information on dealing with horsetail, check with the WSU Extension office for specific recommendations in the latest Pacific Northwest Weed Control handbook.

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