

Horsetail *Equisetum*



This perennial plant belongs to the *Equisetaceae*, Equisetum or horsetail family. Equisetum comes from Latin, *equus* meaning horse and *seta* meaning brittle, referring to the barren stems that supposedly resemble a horse's tail.

Some other common names are joint grass, mare's tail, horse pipes or snake grass. There are several members of this family that are native to the northwest.

Members of the *Equisetaceae* family are prehistoric plants, as are ferns, which may provide a clue as to why and how they have been around so long. This plant spreads by spores located on the cones and has an extensive creeping rhizome system that penetrates to great depths in the soil.

Field horsetail, *Equisetum arvense* L. is a perennial with aerial stems and underground tuber-bearing rootstocks which has dimorphic stems: a fertile cone-bearing stem which arises in early spring is flesh-colored and ½ to 1 foot tall with cones ¾ to 1½ inches long; a sterile or vegetative stem arises after the fertile stem and is 1 1/5 to 2 feet tall with many whorls of slender, green jointed branches.

Giant horsetail, *Equisetum telmateia* Ehrh resembles field horse tail but is much more robust with sterile stems over 1½ feet high and cones which are 1½ to 4 inches long.

Smooth Scouring Rush, *Equisetum laevigatum* A. is a tenacious perennial plant with deep, spreading rootstock. Stems are rough (high silica content), jointed and hollow. Leaves are scale-like appendages located at stem nodes. Fertile stems have a terminal spore-producing cone. Field horsetail produces whorls of branches at each stem node while Scouring Rush is coarse with evergreen stems and very apparent bands at the base of each collar. Field horsetail is adapted to wet areas, while Scouring Rush can be found either along stream banks or in relatively dry soils.



Field horsetail



Giant horsetail



Smooth scouring rush



Scouring rush

Scouring Rush or Rough Horsetail, *Equisetum hyemale L.* has been used in landscapes for the edges of wet areas, ponds, water containers and accent plants for upright growth. **BUYER BEWARE**—do not let this one get away from you.

Equisetums have been a problem in pastures, orchards, nurseries, hayfields, roadsides and landscaped areas particularly on poorly drained soils. It is also found in dry sites such as along railway ballast. Some varieties, especially when dried in hay, have long been known as a toxic concern to young horses and sheep. Fill dirt that contains Equisetum has also been brought into agriculture and landscape sites, so it would be wise to verify the source of the fill dirt.

The long-term control of Equisetums has been very difficult due to their tenacious root systems and high silicone content. An integrated control approach can help alleviate the problem. Improve drainage and encourage growth of a healthy perennial grass cover. Cut or burn fertile stems prior to spore formation to reduce spread potential. Porous landscape fabrics or black plastic mulch effectively prevent Equisetum growth. Sawdust or bark mulches are ineffective. Deep cultivation can be effective in the short term. Be aware that rhizomes cut into very short pieces will regenerate. Shallow cultivation and dragging the rhizomes are not advised.

Few herbicides are registered for control and success is dependent on the situation in which Equisetum grows and the variety of Equisetum. The primary herbicide for homeowners is dichlobenil (Casoron). Before using any herbicide **read the label** to ensure the product is for the desired use and follow label directions. It is very hard to kill Equisetum in a landscape situation. A healthy lawn/turf does discourage it, but if the lawn is thin it sometimes finds its way there.

Resources:

PNW Weed Management Handbook

Weeds of the West; 9th Edition

<http://www.al.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/hrsetail.htm>