

Horsetail/Equisetum & Allotments

Discussion Document

Horsetail, also known as Maretail, can be a difficult to control persistent weed on and around allotment plots. It is an ancient and successful plant; more closely related to ferns than to flowering plants. It has outsurvived all the animals that once fed on it

Above ground it appears in 2 forms:

The most commonly seen looks like a miniature Christmas tree, growing to approx. 45cm; although it can be taller. These stems are sterile and serve the primary function of building up the underground parts of the plant.

More rarely seen are thicker, brown stems without much side growth. The club like top will when ripe open to release spores. I have not seen this fertile stem locally. A picture of one can be found at.....<https://thenatureniche.com>

Below the surface:

The above ground parts arise from underground stems that originate from up to 2metres or more below the surface. These are black in colour and relatively stiff, fine black roots (technically rhizoids) grow out from these. Being stems they are, if broken, able to regenerate complete plants. While most growth is vertically from the deep, the plant does spread laterally.

Management/Control on a mixed site.

There is no 'Magic Bullet' or instant eradication of Horsetail in cropped or uncropped land. Whether we use physical means or chemicals we are looking at minimum of 3 years to effectively reduce the plant to 'Not a Problem' status.

Range of options.

We have combined information from: The RHS, Allotment-garden.org, Nodoggardener.co.uk, and Agricem.co.uk.

On a mixed use site like ours the methodology will be different in different areas and from plotholder to plotholder.

Control. Of Horsetail on the site is not included on the maintenance program

Uncropped & Unmanaged Land

There isn't a horsetail specific herbicide, and those usable for horsetail will kill all other vegetation. The usable chemicals are all of the translocated type, are short lived in the soil, and in one case breaks down into a fertilizer.

Spraying commences in early summer when shoots are 6-12 inches high. Bruising of the stems is advised to improve uptake. Spraying is repeated in subsequent years.

Where the plant is in or adjacent to a stream there is more limited choice of product.

Cropped areas and Infested plots.

In practice the only 'crops' that are unaffected by Horsetail are fruit trees. Horsetail does not take much in the way of water or nutrients from the soil, The working parts of the tree, roots and leaves, are not compromised by the Horsetail. The uncropped area under the tree can be sealed off with weed-protecting matting of various sorts. Where the Horsetail is particularly dense, the plotholder may choose a one-off spray before mulching/sealing. While most articles include dense mulches among the recommendations, none indicate how long it might take to fully kill the weed.

In general the control/eradication of Horsetail requires taking that part of the plot out of cultivation for a few years or building beds isolated by 500 grade polythene from invasion by ascending stems.

If you are able to be thorough and persistent it is possible to effectively manage Horsetail in cropped areas. Thorough removal of stems from the top spit of the soil is possible. This is easier if your soil is relatively light and friable. In such soils the stems are more easily visible and less likely to break into small pieces. Traditional row spacing enables hoeing and hand pulling of regrowth. The Allotment Garden correspondent insists that the shoots need to be less than 3 inches tall at removal, as once taller than this they start making a positive contribution to the underground stores.

Available Chemicals.

The use and availability of commercially available products is complicated by legislation and licensing and can change from year to year. Essentially all the effective chemicals are safe when used responsibly and as directed.

As an extra precaution they are best kept well away from food crops and desirable nature areas.