
Wildflower Spot – March 2014

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

FIELD HORSETAIL

Equisetum arvense

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This plant is not a rush, nor a fern. *Equisetum* is the single surviving genus of a class of primitive vascular plants, which included huge tree-like species, dating back to 350 million years ago. They are grouped with “fern allies” because, like ferns, they do not have flowers, nor seeds, and reproduce by spores. Only four species of *Equisetum* are found in Virginia, two in the mountain region, and one other in our area, Scouring Rush (*E. hyemale*).

Field Horsetail produces separate soft, light brown unbranched stems early in the spring, with cones at the tips. After the spores are shed, the stems wither and green sterile stems start to grow, with their characteristic regular whorled branches, ascending to a foot tall. While these stems die back in winter, this is a perennial, and will return in the spring from the wide-creeping rhizomes. With an extensive root system, the plant can become weedy and difficult to control in the home garden.

Native to nearly every county in Virginia, this plant is found frequently

in floodplain forests, tidal swamps, calcareous marshes, and moist to wet disturbed sites such as ditches and roadsides. Field Horsetail occurs all over North America and into Mexico.

As an herbal remedy, this plant dates back to ancient Roman and Greek medicine, and has been used to stop bleeding, heal wounds, and to treat tuberculosis and kidney problems. Containing silicon, it has been suggested as a treatment for osteoporosis. Horsetails have been found to accumulate traces of gold and have been assayed as a clue to its presence.

The genus name comes from Latin *equus*, “horse,” and *seta*, “bristle,” referring to the coarse black roots of one species. The species name *arvense*, means “of cultivated fields.” ❖



Photo: Field Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.