Horsetails (*Equisetum* species) in Ireland

John Conaghan (County Recorder H16)

Introduction to horsetails (c. 30 mins)

Examination of herbarium specimens (c. 20 mins)
• Very old plant group. Giant horsetail species (*Calamites*) contributed to Carboniferous coal beds (360 to 300 mya).

• c. 20 species worldwide.

• In Ireland 8 species and 4 hybrids.

• Mostly confined to damp, open habitats.

• Life cycle similar to ferns, sporophyte and gametophyte stages present.

• Young shoots can be eaten, but poisonous in large amounts. Extracts used in herbal medicines. Leaves used to clean pots and pans. Cultivars of *Equisetum hyemale* are popular garden plants.
Organic Horsetail Tea

Horsetail tea comes from a unique feathery reed-like plant with a history that goes back to prehistoric times. It is light in flavor and aroma.

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Caffeine Guide

Horsetail Tea Health Benefits
- Optimizes Urinary Tract Health
- Promotes Hair Growth
- Supports Bone Development
- 18 Bleach Free Tea Bags / Box

Steeping Instructions
- Fresh water is essential for brewing a great cup of tea.
- Use 1 teabag per cup of boiling water.
- Cover and steep for 3 to 5 minutes.
- Remove tea bag and enjoy!

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Essential reading
Mare’s tail – *Hippurus vulgaris*
Equisetum arvense (Field horsetail)

- Most common horsetail species
- Spreads via extensive rhizomes, untidy appearance.
- Roadsides and disturbed areas.
- Very common and widespread weed species.
Equisetum palustre (Marsh horsetail)

- Resembles a tidy version of *E. arvense*
- Marshes, fens and wet ditches.
- Common species of wet areas, widespread distribution.
- Possible confusion with *E. arvense*. 
Most useful differences between *Equisetum arvense* and *E. palustre*

- *E. arvense* – stem sheaths with 6 to 18 teeth. Teeth entirely back.

- *E. palustre* – stem sheaths with 4 to 9 teeth. Black with white, membranous margins.
Stem cross-sections of *E. arvense* and *E. palustre* from Plant Crib.
Equisetum fluviatile (Water horsetail)

- Hollow stem, can be easily squashed.
- Short branches.
- Open water along lake margins. Often found in floating rafts of vegetation.
- Wide range of water pH and trophic status
- Widespread distribution.
Equisetum x litorale (Shore horsetail)

- Hybrid between *E. fluviatile* and *E. arvense*, looks more like *arvense*.

- When stem is broken no white inner stem cylinder is revealed, only a ragged torn edge.

- Rocky lake shores and ditches.

- Widespread distribution, probably under-recorded.
Equisetum telmateia (Great horsetail)

- Very tall and robust – up to 1.5m
- Forms extensive clumps
- Flushes and springs
- Base-rich soils, high pH
- Widespread though locally rare
Equisetum sylvaticum (Wood horsetail)

- Low-growing species of woods and flushes.
- Very feathery appearance
- Branched
- Wide range of soil types
- Widespread though locally rare. Most frequent in the north and south-east.
*Equisetum pratense* (Shady horsetail)

- Similar to *E. sylvaticum* but not as feathery.
- Terminal segment of main stem nodding when fully expanded.
- Branches mostly triangular in cross-section
- Wooded stream banks and upland flushes.
- Very rare. Legally protected in ROI.
Equisetum hyemale (Dutch rush)

- Tall (50 to 100cm), hollow, reed-like stems.
- Narrow sheath at each joint, whitish with a black band.
- Very rough, used for scouring pots in the past.
- River margins and wet woods
- Quite rare. Most frequent in Ulster.
Equisetum variegatum (Variegated horsetail)

- Low-growing, often creeping. Much less robust than *E. hyemale*.

- Narrow stem sheath. Teeth have conspicuous white margins.

- Generally confined to lake margins, flushes and dune slacks. Base-rich habitats.

- Uncommon species, widely scattered. Most frequent in midlands and north-west.
Equisetum x trachyodon (Mackays horsetail)

- Hybrid between *E. hyemale* and *E. variegatum*.
- Like hyemale but stems not hollow.
- Stems erect generally <5mm with black leaf sheaths.
- Usually along river banks.
- Uncommon hybrid, widely scattered. Mostly in the northern half.
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<td><strong>Cone</strong></td>
<td>Not apiculate but sharply pointed, 7-15 mm long, partly concealed by teeth of uppermost sheath</td>
<td>Apiculate at apex, 4-5 mm long, usually remaining half within the uppermost sheath</td>
<td>Apiculate at apex, 5-7 mm long</td>
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<td><strong>Stem</strong></td>
<td>Deep green, erect, unbranched, less than 12 mm wide, with 10-30 ridges; stem feels soft, hollow 2/3 – 3/4 diameter of stem; winter-green.</td>
<td>Deep green; erect or becoming procumbent, sometimes branched on previous year’s stems and then very much like \textit{E. variegatum}, 8-13 acutely bi-angled ridges, hollow 1/2 diameter of stem; winter-green</td>
<td>Deep to mid-green, usually prostrate or ascending, occasionally erect, with 6-8 bi-angular ridges, hollow c. 1/3 diameter of stem; winter-green</td>
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Botanical Society of the British Isles in association with National Museums & Galleries of Wales
Equisetum x moorei (Moore’s horsetail)

- Hybrid between *E. hyemale* and *E. ramosissimum*.
- Like *E. hyemale* but less robust and not usually wintergreen.
- Sand dunes and clay banks along the sea.
- Rare and legally protected. Confined to coastal parts of Wicklow and Wexford.