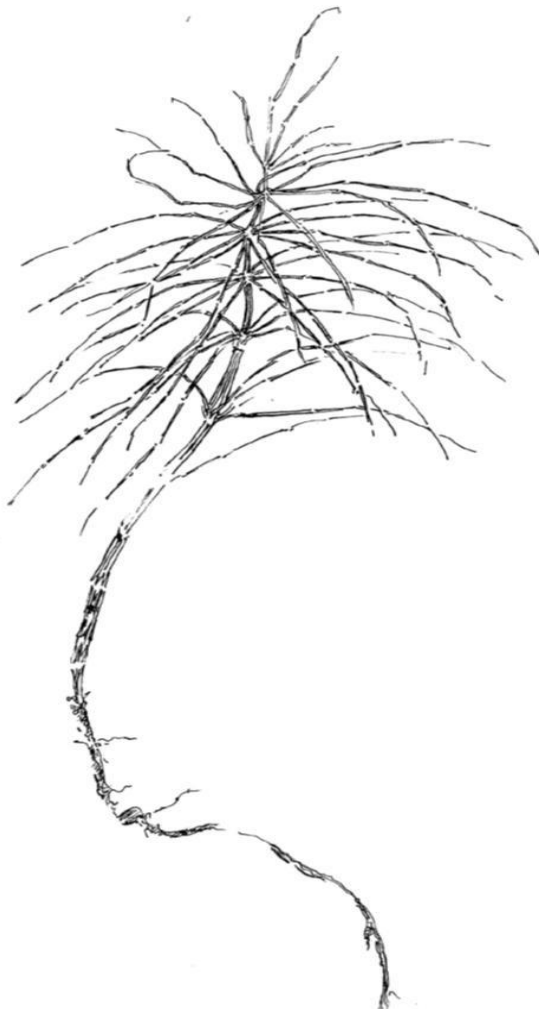


Beating Horsetail

By Ciscoe Morris

A note from Cass: Never assume that because something is native that it is a well-behaved plant. Our native horsetail is an example that seems to be taking over Seattle in a mega-way during the past five years. It's ruining landscape plantings everywhere, or so it seems.



At Seattle University, we try to garden without using pesticides whenever possible. Controlling horsetail has been one of the most difficult challenges. (I've given up on trying to defeat morning glory.) We finally concluded that if you can't beat horsetail, hide it. Instead of trying to kill it, in selected areas we use aggressive groundcovers to keep horsetail out of sight. The horsetail that most of us battle is *Equisetum telmateia*, or giant horsetail. If you have it in your garden, it means that you were bad in your last life. I must have been horrible, because it is all over Seattle University. Giant or common horsetail generally grows 2.5 ft. tall. This weed has a community root system. You can't get it all out of the ground, and every little bit that remains sends up a new shoot. You can pull it today, and it will be back in higher numbers within a week. Horsetail has two growth stages. The reproductive stage looks somewhat like asparagus and appears only in spring. The cone on top is filled with spores that disperse to start new colonies all over the garden. The American Natives actually ate

horsetail at this stage. The more familiar Christmas tree-like vegetative stage is filled with silica. This stage was used to scour out cooking pots and pans. It is poisonous to horses and cattle and is also occasionally sold in herbal medicine stores. It must be used to treat mental illness, because only a crazy person would be willing to pay for horsetail.

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Horsetail finds its way into our gardens in a variety of ways. It can come in on topsoil, in the soil of purchased plants, or the spores might just blow in. If you catch it the minute it first appears, you should be able to dig out all of the roots and be rid of it. Once horsetail has a foothold, there is no hope. Some folks resort to a pre-emergent pesticide called Casoron, but that is little more than a chemical trap. It can harm ornamental plants, has been found regularly in our water systems, and later, horsetail becomes resistant. Glyphosate (Round-Up) and the hybrid mixes of Glyphosate with other herbicides such as 24D, are also found in our water systems and rarely succeed in eradicating horsetail. Regular weeding will greatly weaken horsetail. Unfortunately, take a week off for a summer vacation and 50 years of effort are lost. The only method I have found that can defeat this horrid monster is to hide horsetail with thick, tall growing groundcovers.

I admit that I've never eradicated horsetail by using groundcovers. Even after 20 years I can still find horsetail healthy and thriving within the foliage of the competing plant. The one exception is turf. In one isolated area of the campus where horsetail was driving us crazy, we actually pulled out all of the trees and shrubs and planted a lawn. After a couple of years of weekly mowing, all sign of the horsetail (and morning glory) disappeared. We then removed the lawn and reestablished a garden bed. That was a number of years ago, and to this date, no horsetail or morning glory has returned. However, turning gardens into lawns is probably not a trend that is going to catch on. For the average homeowner, hiding horsetail with groundcovers is a more practical solution.

I've been experimenting for almost 20 years to find plants that can mask the existence of horsetail. Note that what I call a groundcover does not fit the common description. In order to be effective, a plant must reach at least 2.5 to 3 ft. tall, must be a broadleaf evergreen, or, if deciduous, must leaf out thickly in early spring before the horsetail emerges. The plants must be well adapted to growing conditions so that they remain thick and vigorous.

The following is a list of the plants I have found to be effective. The list is far from complete as there are doubtless many other plants available capable of effectively screening out horsetail. Also, although at Seattle University we do sometimes plant mono-stands, we often mix these competitive plants together to make gardens more interesting, while effectively hiding horsetail. Even perennial gardens will effectively screen out horsetail if the plants are tall growing and closely planted. Note that the following plants do not work: tam juniper and most other conifers are too thin, allowing horsetail to emerge above the foliage. Low groundcovers such as kinnikinnik, creeping bramble (*Rubus pentalobus*), *Lithodora diffusa*, creeping thyme, Strawberry, cotoneaster, etc., are too low to do any good. Ivy is the worst of all: it is worthless as competition for horsetail, it climbs and kills trees, and it harbors rats. The horsetail gets going before the shrubs leaf out and remains apparent all summer long. Then you are stuck (literally) having to weed a briar patch.

Keep in mind that some of the plants on the following list are aggressive and have the potential to become somewhat of a weed in their own right. Geranium endressii 'Claridge Druce' is economical to use because it seeds prolifically and spreads quickly. However, it can overrun and kill delicate or small plants. Several Miscanthus species are potentially invasive seeders that could become ecological problems. Careful consideration must be given to choose varieties that do not have the potential to become invasive in their nature.

Plants Used at Seattle University to Hide Horsetail

Cistus (Rockrose): Cistus is one of the most effective shrubs at hiding horsetail. Some of our Cistus beds are over 20 years old, and we almost never weed them. It's best used to cover large areas in full sun. It can be expensive, but it takes easily from cuttings. Planted 3.5 ft. apart, Cistus can take up to three years to give total weed control. Once established, it is extremely drought tolerant. Be aware that hardiness varies. Some species may not succeed in areas with cold microclimates. Avoid planting rockrose in fall. These plants need a season off growth to develop cold tolerance. Cistus hybridus is one of the toughest varieties. It gets about 4 ft. tall. It only blooms for two weeks in spring, but has incredibly fragrant foliage. C. purpureus has attractive purple flowers over a long season, but is slightly less hardy. C. ladanifer has proved to be quite hardy at Seattle University and has pretty white flowers with a red throat all summer long. C. skanburgii is my favorite. It's hardy and only gets about 3 ft. tall. C. skanburgii blooms with pretty pink flowers during a long period in summer.

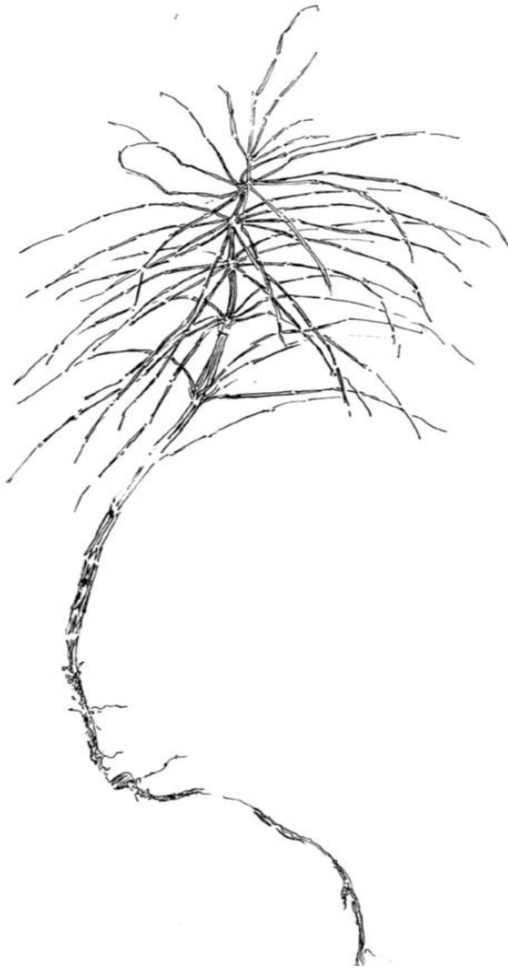
Lonicera (Honeysuckle): The best honeysuckles for hiding horsetail are in the Nitida species (Boxleaf honeysuckle). L. nitida is an evergreen shrub with a wild-looking growth habit. They will take most any type of soil. L. nitida needs full- to half-sun. They get over 4 ft. tall, but can be pruned to keep them lower. My favorite varieties are L. nitida 'Baggesen's Gold' with variegation that can really light up the winter landscape. There is a spectacular new variety called L. nitida 'Silver Beauty' that stays lower and has creamy white leaves. We recently began experimenting with L. piliata. This is a spreading evergreen shrub reaching about 3 ft. tall. However, this is the first year of the experiment, and I'm seeing some horsetail poke through. The verdict is not in.

Geranium endressii 'Claridge Druce' (Claridge Druce Hardy Geranium): This is a foolproof plant, extremely effective at hiding horsetail. It goes dormant in the winter, but comes up before the horsetail, and grows quickly to 3 ft. tall. The horsetail never gets to see the light of day. Shear it after flower and it will look neater and repeat bloom. This geranium has its bad side. It will seed where you don't want it and, as already mentioned, will overwhelm small plants. The good news is that the seedlings are easily pulled. We usually use G. 'Claridge Druce' as a temporary measure until we can decide on a permanent planting that will hide horsetail, but it works wonderfully under tall shrubs as a permanent solution. Not at all fussy about soil, G. 'Claridge Druce' takes sun with irrigation and is drought tolerant in semi-shade.

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Cornus sanguineus, stolonifera, and alba (Twig Dogwood): These are some of the few deciduous plants that grow thick enough to hide horsetail. We use them at the bottom of steep slopes and in gobboldy-gook soil that stays wet in spring and dries out like a rock in summers. *C. stolonifera* 'Kelsey' is a dwarf form that works great. *C. alba* 'Elegantissima' has incredibly attractive variegated leaves and flaming red stems. We cut the tall kinds down, at least every three years to induce thick, short, colorful stems.

Abelia 'Edward Goucher': This evergreen member of the honeysuckle family is a rock. It has attractive, fragrant flowers all summer long. Yet it can handle any soil, takes sun or semi shade, never needs water once established, and is a gem at hiding horsetail. Plant 3.5 ft. apart and within three years you will probably never weed again. A. 'Edward Goucher' rarely exceeds 5 ft. tall.



Anemone x hybrid (Japanese Anemone): Any variety of this late-blooming anemone will do. Watch out, these are aggressive perennials that will wipe out wimpy plants. They are also tenacious. Once you plant them, you've got them forever. However, we use them quite effectively in horrible clay in sun or shade. These perennials give great weed control along fences and confined beds. Japanese Anemone will run in moist soils. Plant them where they can be confined.

Sasa veitchii (Kuma bamboo): This attractive variegated bamboo grows to about 4 ft. tall and is drought-tolerant, but resents shade. It grows well in heavy soils and, as long as it gets water, spreads rapidly to blanket and hide horsetail. Obviously, as is true of all bamboos, you must keep this plant contained or the cure will be worse than the horsetail.

Gaultheria shallon (Salal): This native is often recommended to prevent erosion on steep banks. Salal stays low in sun and grows up to 10 ft. in shade. Salal is an inexpensive way to cover large areas. Use rooted cuttings (salal is almost impossible to transplant), plant 3.5 ft. apart, and within three years, horsetail will

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disappear from sight. Salal can be aggressive and overwhelm small plants. A great bird feeder, this native rarely needs irrigation once established.

Ornamental Grasses: There are several varieties of ornamental grasses that are capable of keeping horsetail out of sight. Most grasses will work as long as they are at least 3 ft. tall, and planted in full sun. Although they go dormant in the fall, most grasses grow back quickly enough in spring to give adequate control. A drawback is that grasses that go dormant must be cut to the ground in spring to remove the straw-like old growth, and some varieties must be divided at least every five years to keep them from looking ratty, or even dying out. Many grasses will spread in heavy clay soil, making them an economical choice. However, as mentioned, some of the Miscanthus and other grasses have the potential to become invasive in nature and should be avoided. Miscanthus 'purpurascens' rarely self-seeds and is not invasive. It is tall enough to hide horsetail, yet never needs staking. The red-orange fall foliage is exceeded in beauty only by the extraordinary effect of a mass of the pink-silver blooms in late summer. Calamagrostis x acutiflora (feather reed grass) is a tough grass that is not considered a threat to the environment. It reaches 4 ft., but has flowers that get over 6 ft. high. It never needs staking and can grow in sand or clay. It is in constant motion and, although it has no fall color, remains standing as a vertical statement throughout the winter. Feather reed grass is exceptionally effective against horsetail, as it begins to grow very early in the season. Panicum virgatum 'Hanse Herms' is an attractive hybrid of one of our native prairie grasses. Reaching about 4 ft. tall, this grass turns a spectacular red in fall. The flowers have a red tint. Panicum spreads from rhizomes at a moderate rate, making them a safe economical groundcover for large areas. Try using some of these plants and see if it works for you. Admittedly, hiding horsetail has its limits and won't work in every case. It certainly beats relying on chemicals that rarely succeed and endanger our environment. And, if nothing else, these plants can be used in back areas of the landscape to enable you to spend more time keeping high visibility areas looking great. In the meantime, start trying to live a better life. You don't want to go through this again the next time around!