



horsetail

Equisetum spp.

Kingdom: Plantae
Division/Phylum: Equisetophyta

Features

Horsetails are perennial herbs. The stems are upright, jointed, grooved, and may grow up to six feet tall in some species. Some horsetails may have branches radiating from the joints on the main stem. Others are unbranched. Leaves are reduced to tiny, black, triangular scales that surround the stem at each joint. Cone-like structures at the tips of certain stems produce spores.

Common horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) produces flesh-colored reproductive stems with cone-like structures at their tips in April that grow to about 10 inches high, then turn brown and release spores. The branched green stems appear later and may grow to two feet tall. Several skinny branches radiate from the joints on the main stem so it resembles a small Christmas tree.

Natural History

Horsetails form dense colonies in moist soil along streams, lakes, marshes, roads, and railroads. They reproduce by spores in the spring. Pioneers used horsetails to scrub pots and pans. Silica in the stems of these “scouring rushes” makes them sturdy and

very rough. Horsetails are among some of the most ancient plants. This plant is known to be poisonous to livestock, especially when fed in dry hay. Livestock usually avoid it in pastures because of its rough texture.

Habitats

interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; Mississippi River; Missouri River; wet prairies and fens

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.