

## A misnomer matter

One thing guaranteed to make me slightly annoyed is when someone refers to the prehistoric plant, Horsetail, as Mare's-tail. It is such a widespread mistake and perhaps I should learn to be less easily irritated. 'Mare's-tail is invading my garden so how can I get rid of it - I have tried everything?' is commonly heard on programmes such as *Gardener's Question Time*. Even Network Rail made the same error in referring to the terrible threat from invading Mare's-tail to Plumpton Station. It would be a rather special station or garden if Mare's-tail were present.

So what is Mare's-tail and why isn't it Horsetail? Mare's-tail *Hippurus vulgaris* is an aquatic plant, the only member of the family Hippuridaceae. It grows in ponds, ditches and slow-flowing streams. In Sussex it is most frequent in clean calcareous water flowing from the chalk but can tolerate slightly saline habitats and also occurs near the coast. Despite its specific name, *vulgaris* meaning common, it isn't at all common in our county. *The Flora of Sussex* (2018) shows a few dots on the map. The nearest one of these is in the Westmeston area but it hasn't been recorded there in the last 20 years (I may go and see if I can find it when Covid-19 restrictions lift). The neglect of ditches, nutrient enrichment and pollution from agricultural chemicals has contributed to its decline. It has also been lost from ponds that have become shaded, silted and overgrown.

While Mare's-tail is a flowering plant, Horsetails belong to a primitive group of plants related to ferns. It does not have flowers and reproduces by spores produced in little cone-like structures at the tip of fertile shoots. Six species of Horsetails are present in Sussex, some of them rare. The one that is an unwelcome and persistent weed in gardens is Field Horsetail *Equisetum arvense*, which is very common in disturbed habitats, open grassland, roadsides, waste ground, arable fields and railway tracks.

While gardeners don't like it (understandably) the Romans, including Pliny, who called it 'hair of the earth', considered it to be a general tonic and restorative and recommended eating the young shoots as salad. *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* made many claims for its medicinal benefits including

'it is very powerful to stop bleeding, either inward or outward, the juice of the decoction being drunk, or the juice decoction, or distilled water applied outwardly. It also stays laxes or fluxes in man or woman, and heals the inward ulcers, and the excoriation of the entrails, bladder etc. It solders together the tops of green wounds, and cures all ruptures in children..'

and much more besides.

In a more modern book (*The Country Diary Herbal*) Sarah Hollis describes the medicinal properties - as a diuretic, healer of wounds and an astringent. She says it can be bought in pill form and can be made into a decoction. No other plant contains such a high concentration of silica and this means that it is highly abrasive. Bunches were used for scouring pots and milkmaids' buckets, as well as for polishing brass and pewter. Cabinet makers used it to polish wood too.

Julian Barker's (2001) *The Medicinal Flora of Britain and Northwestern Europe*, states that *Equisetum arvense* is still a most important remedy for European phytotherapists; it has widespread application for the maintenance of health in all connective tissue and has a central role in the treatment by plants of atheromatous conditions.

So perhaps this much-hated plant deserves a little more respect but if you want to get rid of it Sarah Hollis says that only nasturtiums are said to smother and kill it off effectively.

Jacqui Hutson