

Mare's Tail Infestation

Information Source: www.gardenninja.co.uk

Mare's tail or horsetail [weeds are a deviant perennial](#) evergreen garden pest that can be a nightmare for new and experienced gardeners. It soon pops up in flower beds, in between paving and even through tarmac. It can be easy to reach for the weedkiller, but this guide will show you why glyphosate is not the ideal option and what else you can do to get rid of or control mares' tails in the garden.

What is Mare's Tail (*Equisetum arvense*)?

Mare's tail is one of the most recognisable and fear-inducing weeds you can find in your garden. This nearly indestructible [evergreen](#) weed pokes up from the ground with its thin spikes, both stem and leaf in one. Whether you have a gorgeously manicured, weeded and curated garden or a rubble-filled building site, mare's tail will live and thrive in any conditions.

Mares tail is sometimes known as horse tail or Horsetail; all of which are the same weed. Horsetail is mare's tail and vice versa. Though the correct common name is mare's tail, if we're being pedantic!

How difficult is Mares Tail to eradicate?

Mare's tail (also known as horsetail) is one of the oldest [plants](#) on Earth, dating back over 100 million years, even pre-dating the dinosaurs. It belongs to the genus *Equisetum*, a group of ancient, non-flowering plants that reproduce by spores, not seeds. A bit similar to ferns in the way that they reproduce. This makes them super tough and very difficult to remove or manage which is why so many of you ask me how to get rid of mares tail.

Despite its graceful name, mare's tail is one of the most invasive, persistent and difficult-to-eradicate weeds found in UK gardens. It spreads rapidly underground and can dominate borders, paving cracks, lawns and allotments if left unchecked. Most gardeners opt to reduce Mares tails impact rather than remove it entirely due to the struggle to kill it completely.

Identifying Mare's Tail

It's easy to spot mare's tail as its long, thin stem/leaf and summer foliage looks a bit like a horse's tail, hence the name. In the United States, people call it horsetail weed, whereas in the United Kingdom and Europe, it's commonly referred to as mare's tail.

Mare's tail has two distinct growth stages each year:

1. Fertile Shoots (Spring – March to May)

- Appear first as **pale brown stems** with **cone-like tips**.
- These cones release millions of spores into the wind.
- Short-lived but vital for reproduction.

2. Sterile Shoots (Late Spring to Autumn)

- Follow shortly after the fertile shoots die back.
- Appear as **green, upright, brush-like stems** with whorls of needle-thin leaves.
- Grow 20–50 cm tall (sometimes more), giving the plant its signature “tail” appearance.

Why is Mare’s Tail So Hard to Get Rid Of?

Speak to any gardener or allotment owner and mention mares’ tails and groans and disgusted stares will meet you. This is usually because mares’ tail is a near-endless problem for all gardeners, whether growing vegetables in a kitchen garden or wildflower meadows in rural areas. Let’s take a look at why mares’ tails are so difficult to get rid of.

i) Extensive Root System of Mares Tail

Horsetail has an incredibly deep and resilient root system composed of rhizomes, which are horizontal underground stems. These rhizomes can penetrate more than two metres into the soil, allowing the plant to access deep water reserves and nutrients that many other plants cannot reach. This depth also makes it extremely difficult to fully remove, as the roots often grow well below the reach of typical cultivation tools.

ii) Mares’ Tail Regenerates Easily

One of the most persistent characteristics of maretail is its ability to regenerate from the tiniest piece of root or rhizome left behind in the soil. Even a fragment as small as a centimetre can develop into a new plant, making complete eradication a real challenge without meticulous removal and follow-up treatments.

iii) Silica Coating

The above-ground stems of mares/horsetail are coated with silica, a gritty compound that makes them unusually tough. This not only gives the plant a rough texture but also protects it from being grazed by herbivores, reduces [water loss during drought conditions](#), and renders many common weedkillers ineffective, as the coating prevents effective absorption.

iv) Roots Spread Underground Intensively

Mares’ tail spreads predominantly through its subterranean rhizome system, allowing it to colonise large areas quickly. These rhizomes can travel laterally beneath the soil surface and produce new shoots at considerable distances from the original plant. It’s not uncommon for new

growth to appear metres away, giving the impression that the plant has suddenly ‘popped up’ elsewhere in the garden.

How to Control Mare’s Tail Organically

While complete eradication may take several seasons if not decades, consistent organic control can significantly reduce and suppress mare’s tail over time. Especially if you make it part of your regular gardening routine.

A bit like watering plants in hot weather, monthly Mare’s tail pulling and smothering can help reduce its invasiveness in your gardens.

1. Regular Cutting or Pulling (Never Let it Photosynthesise)

- The key to organic control is to **weaken the plant’s energy reserves** stored in its roots.
- Cut or pull the shoots **as soon as they appear**, ideally every **1–2 weeks**.
- This constant defoliation prevents the plant from generating energy and forces it to utilise its underground reserves.
- Do **not dig deeply** unless absolutely necessary — disturbing the soil often breaks up the roots, spreading it further.

A [Hori-Hori is the best tool to quickly and cleanly](#) dig out mares’ tails (you can find them with the link – this is an affiliate link, for which I receive a small kickback if you purchase)

2. Smothering (Light Exclusion)

- Cover the affected area with **black polythene, cardboard, or heavy-duty [weed membrane](#)**.
- Leave in place for **at least one full growing season**, ideally two.
- Weigh down the edges and check for any regrowth that may be sneaking out from the sides.
- Combine this with regular edge trimming to keep it from escaping.
- This is the best method in my experience

3. Improve Soil Conditions

Mare’s tail thrives in compacted, poorly drained, low-nutrient soils — often a sign your garden needs improving.

Whilst improving soil won’t remove Mare’s tail it’s a good indicator that things need some improvement, and then you can add some more fast-growing plants to help out compete it (see the next section for more on that)

To discourage it: Aerate compacted soil (with a fork, not a rotavator), then add well-rotted compost or organic matter to improve structure and fertility to open up the soil structure. Healthier, looser soil supports stronger plants, vegetables, crops and suppresses mare's tail through plant competition.

4. Use Strong Ground Cover Plants

In less cultivated areas, try planting vigorous, spreading groundcovers to compete with and [shade](#) out the mare's tail. Options include:

- Symphytum officinale (Comfrey)
- Pentaglottis sempervirens (Green alkanet – A weed in itself)
- Mentha / Mint (though this will run thoroughly through all flower [beds](#), so beware!)
- Lysimachia nummularia (Creeping Jenny)
- Vinca minor (Periwinkle)
- Galium odoratum (Sweet woodruff)

These won't eradicate Mare's tail, but they can help smother and reduce light reaching its shoots.

5. Avoid Spreading It

- **Never compost the roots or stems** unless your compost heap gets hot enough to break them down (most don't, so don't risk it, Ninjas).
- Always **bag and dispose** of via green waste collection or general waste if you're unsure.
- Clean tools and footwear if you've worked in an infested area to prevent spreading it to clean ground. Any small part of it that breaks away can then root as its own parent plant, spawning more mare's tails.

Long-Term Management of Mares' Tail

Patience is key when trying to remove or reduce Mare's tail. Organic control methods may take 2–3 years to show major results, but they are effective when done consistently.

The goal is to:

Exhaust the root system.

Suppress new growth.

Encourage healthier soil and competing plants.

You may just think ‘I’ll reach for the weed killer’, but trust me when I say that it’s actually less effective than manual methods. It damages other plants, is expensive and takes multiple applications to even make a dent in Mares’ tail.

Is Mares Tail toxic to animals or children?

Many guides on Mares tail list its toxicity and talk about alkaloids like palustrine being harmful. Whilst this is true, you would have to eat a ton of it to get enough mare’s tail in your system to become ill. The chances of that are extremely unlikely unless you intentionally consume it or mistake it for another plant and make an herbal tea out of it.

While occasional contact isn’t dangerous, horsetail should never be ingested by animals or children. It’s best to remove it from areas where pets or young children might have unsupervised access, especially really young infants who have a tendency to eat things that they find. Never use it in homemade herbal remedies with Mares tail.

Can I use glyphosate/Roundup on Mares tail weed?

Glyphosate is a non-selective, systemic herbicide. This means it kills most green plants it touches by being absorbed through the leaves and then transported throughout the plant, all the way down to the roots. It’s commonly sold under brand names like Roundup. However, with Mares’ tail, that silica coating means it’s least effective on this weed compared to creeping buttercup, couch grass or bindweed.

Should I use Glyphosate for Mares tail?

The quick answer is no, you shouldn’t. It has a very low efficacy rate with mares’ tail due to the waxy silica coating on the leaves and also a lack of permeable foliage, which is how glyphosate enters plants to kill them. That said, some gardeners will try glyphosate to get rid of mare’s tail, which is why I give instructions below to get the best effects. However, I myself would not use it and it’s mega harmful to the environment and used by beginner gardeners spraying it with abandon causes all sorts of knock-on issues as it drifts on the breeze and kills your prize herbaceous perennials!

How to Use Glyphosate on Mare’s Tail

If you are going to use weed killer, then here’s some guidance if that’s what you choose to do (though I urge you to consider the smother method instead!).

1. Timing Is Crucial

Apply glyphosate when the horsetail is in active growth — ideally between **late spring and mid-summer**. At this point, the plant is sending energy back into the rhizomes, which helps carry the herbicide deep into its root system.

2. Bruise or Crush the Foliage First

Horsetail stems are coated in **silica**, making them tough and waxy, which reduces glyphosate absorption. **Lightly crush, bruise, or damage** the stems with a stick, rolling

pin, or by walking over them gently. This increases the surface area and improves penetration.

3. **Apply on a Dry Day**

Pick a **still, dry day** with no rain forecast for at least 6 hours. Wind or rain can reduce effectiveness and cause drift onto desirable plants.

4. **Spray Carefully**

Spray directly onto the horsetail foliage, taking care to avoid surrounding plants. Glyphosate is non-selective and will kill most plants it touches. Use a shield or cardboard barrier to protect nearby vegetation if necessary. The best method is to use a paint brush, dip it in the glyphosate and then manually brush it onto the stems.

5. **Repeat as Needed**

One treatment will not eradicate the mare's tail. Expect to repeat applications several times over a growing season and possibly for multiple years. Regular follow-up is essential to suppress regrowth and deplete the underground root reserves. (This is one of the main reasons weed killers are useless on mares' tails and risks damaging the wider environment with near-endless applications.

Drawbacks of Using Glyphosate

Limited Effectiveness on Horsetail: Mare's tail has poor leaf surface absorption and a deep root system, so glyphosate is only partially effective without repeat treatments and proper technique.

Non-Selective: It will kill everything it contacts, including grasses, flowers, and [crops](#), so care must be taken when applying.

Environmental Concerns: [Glyphosate is under scrutiny for its environmental and health impacts](#). Some countries and councils have banned or restricted their use. Always check local regulations and consider safer alternatives if possible.

Persistence of Rhizomes: Even after dieback above ground, rhizomes can survive and resprout. Total eradication may take several seasons of dedicated treatment.

Not Pet- or Child-Friendly During Use: Glyphosate should be kept well away from children and animals until fully dried and absorbed.

What NOT to Do with Mares Tail

Don't rotavate the area – it chops up roots and helps spread it.

Don't ignore it – even one plant left to grow will feed the underground network.

Don't rely on a single control method – success comes from combining multiple strategies.