**The History of Horsetail**

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Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) has a long and varied history of medicinal use. In the first century AD, Galen described it as cooling and drying to the body. Culpeper, in the 17th century, described it as a hardening medicine, meaning it reduced inflammation and excess moisture in the body.

Horsetail makes an effective natural diuretic. In modern medicine, a diuretic is usually supplemented by potassium to replace the potassium lost in urine. Horsetail, however, has its own built-in way of helping the body maintain...continued on page 78

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**A Polished Herb**

The Latin name "*Equisetum*" translates as *equus*, meaning "horse", and *seta*, meaning "bristle". Other common names are pewter brush, scouring rush, pewterwort, shave grass, bottle-brush, paddock pipes and Dutch rushes. These names refer to the many historical uses of this plant. Because of its abrasive silica content, horsetail was used for polishing a wide variety of materials. In Europe it was used on objects made of pewter. European comb makers polished their wares and dairy maids scrubbed their milk pails with horsetail. It was also used for polishing wood in both Europe and North America.

Similarly, the First Nations people on the West Coast of North America used horsetail to polish their hand-woven canoes. While there is not much history of its use as food, Nancy Turner at the University of Victoria has recorded it eaten at one time by the Hesquiat First Nations people. They would harvest it on the West Coast of Vancouver Island first thing in the spring when it was "full of juice." ■
potassium levels. In a normal diet the ratio of potassium to sodium is about 2:1, but in horsetail it is 150:1, which means any potassium lost by its diuretic action is replaced naturally.

In combination with other herbs, horsetail is used in cystitis (bladder infection), and in interstitial cystitis (inflammation of the layer between bladder lining and muscle). Its effectiveness is thought to come from its alkalizing effect on urine and from the fact that it makes the bladder wall less permeable to bacteria.

Horsetail has long been used in both kidney and bladder stones, having a solvent effect on uric stones. It also helps to heal and tone the wall of the bladder, especially strengthening the bladder sphincter. This makes horsetail very valuable in conditions where frequent urination is due to a weak bladder sphincter. It is often combined to good effect with hydrangea root (Hydrangea arborescens) for men with benign prostate enlargement. It would seem that an herb that increases the need to urinate would be aggravating, whereas in fact the tissue healing, strengthening and toning actions of horsetail actually improve the condition.

In the last century horsetail was used to treat tuberculosis and is now used for conditions where tissue repair to damaged lungs is required. Horsetail is also used to curb excessive menstrual bleeding through its astringent and toning properties.

Russian research conducted in the early 1960s indicates that horsetail effectively removes toxic lead accumulation from the body, echoing the tradition of use as a blood cleanser.

Externally, horsetail is known as a vulnerary, meaning it increases wound healing, and has been used as a poultice to staunch bleeding. Herbalists today would not use an herb with such cooling and drying qualities for an extended period of time unless the person's condition specifically indicated it.

Horsetail-ing Around
A neanderthal-looking plant, horsetail is found in moist areas and on wasteland. Horsetail species grow all over the world, even in the Arctic. Several species flourish in Canada, and it’s important to correctly identify Equisetum arvense to avoid the poisonous species Equisetum palustre.

In springtime horsetail sends up a stem with a fruiting body that rather resembles asparagus. This fruit dies down once spores are released, and is replaced by fine, green, many-jointed, leafless stems. The plant spreads as much by its underground rhizomes as by its spores and once it is in a garden it is extremely difficult to get rid of. In current western herbal medicine, horsetail's above-soil stems are the parts used as herb.

Horsetail has been used in First Nations, Chinese and Tibetan medicine and it is still used by herbalists all over the world as an invaluable medicinal plant.

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