

Equisetum



Common Name: Scouring rush

Scientific Name: *Equisetum*

Family: Equisetaceae

Equisetum is a 'living fossil', the only living genus of the entire subclass Equisetidae, which for over 100 million years was much more diverse and dominated the understory of late Palaeozoic forests. *Equisetum* is the only living genus in Equisetaceae, a family of ferns that reproduce by spores rather than seeds. It is assumed that horsetails were an important component of herbivorous dinosaur diets.

Equisetum leaves are greatly reduced and usually non-photosynthetic. They contain a single, non-branching vascular trace, which is the defining feature of microphylls. The leaves of horsetails are arranged in whorls fused into nodal sheaths. The stems are usually green and photosynthetic and are distinctive in being hollow, jointed and ridged (with sometimes 3 but usually 6–40 ridges). There may or may not be whorls of branches at the nodes. Unusually, the branches often emerge below the leaves in an internode and grow from buds between their bases.

Utilisation: The fertile stems bearing strobili of some species are cooked and eaten like asparagus. *E. arvense* contains thiaminase, which metabolizes the B vitamin, thiamine, potentially causing thiamine deficiency and associated liver damage, if taken chronically.