

Marestail

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The great American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." Perhaps Mr. Emerson was standing in his garden during the early 1800's observing the robust growth of Marestail when this thought occurred. Marestail was a weed then and continues to this day but with reservations I have to admit that perhaps its virtues, at least medicinally, are now known. Due to beneficial rainfall needed for germination, 2019 has been a year of plenty for marestail, it is seen virtually everywhere. It is not unusual to have marestail show up each year, but it is usually seen in scattered stands of just a few individual plants. It can be seen this year in large stands in native rangeland, pastureland, cropland, woodlands and any disturbed areas. While we often only think about the introduced and invasive plants from other parts of the world that we have to deal with, marestail was exported with trade goods, likely Canadian furs to France in the 17th century, so apparently there is karma in the plant world.

Marestail, *Conyza canadensis*, is a native, annual warm season forb that can be found in nearly every county in Texas and all of North America and Canada. Other common names include horseweed, Canadian horseweed and Canadian fleabane. These plants are erect in growth with a single-stem or multi-stems reaching 3 to 5 feet and if receiving favorable moisture can grow to 7 feet. The stems and leaves show bristly-hairs. The leaves are long and thin with a sharp tip, lengths vary from 1 to 3 inches long and up to 1/3 inch in width. The leaf margins often reveal widely spaced teeth. The numerous flower heads arise from the leaf axils and have small heads with white ray flowers and yellow disk flowers. The flower petals within the heads are not very showy and may not be readily observed.

Marestail was utilized by many Native American tribes for ailments ranging from coughs, colds and fevers to stomach pain. There is quite a bit of information on current use in the medicinal world treating diarrhea and dysentery. The seedling leaves are said to be edible while the mature leaves can be dried and used as a seasoning. The name fleabane comes from the use of putting dried leaves in the bedding of dogs to drive away fleas. The plant is not readily grazed or browsed upon by livestock or wildlife. The seeds are very tiny and while numerous in quantity, the small size probably limits its use by game and song birds. A redeeming value are the late summer flowers which are utilized by many very small pollinators.

There are similar looking plants to marestail that may cause confusion at first glance. Tall goldenrod is a native, perennial warm season forb that grows straight upright and branches in the upper parts of the stem. The flowers of goldenrod, and there are several species found across Texas, are solid yellow while marestail flowers are white with yellow center. In most locations marestail will have flowered earlier by a month than the beginning of goldenrod flowering in early September. Willow baccharis, a native shrub has woody limbs that grow upright like marestail but the woody nature with branching near the ground will separate the two.

Good grazing management to include leaving a healthy stand of grass following grazing goes a long way in reducing the bare ground, water and sunlight that most weeds use to gain a foothold. As we go into late fall that first frost is just around the corner, remember that all the forage grown this summer has to last until the start of new growth around April 1st of next year. Remember the old

range management rule, “take half and leave half” and your weed problems may not be as bad next year. A dry spell during fall and early winter will also reduce the amount of weed problems you will have to manage the following spring and summer.

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Photo Captions:

1. Marestalk growing in ruins of Fort Phantom Hill north of Abilene, Texas



2 Marestalk seen in old brush burn pile along with giant ragweed and snow on the mountain.



3 Short, bristly hairs seen on the leaves and stems of marestalk.



4 Straight stems with numerous thin leaves and branching flower heads at terminal tip of stem.



5 Marestalk on left and tall goldenrod on right, similar look may be confusing but long, thin leaves distinguishes marestalk.

