

MANAGING HORSE PASTURES

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Horses and pastures seem to go together. Pastures supply feed and exercise, but unless productive, they provide only exercise.

Horses graze selectively, often eating one kind of plant and passing over others. This leaves unutilized areas which become unpalatable and can eventually eliminate the most palatable species. Good management can reduce these problems and make the pasture more useful.

Delay Early Grazing - A common cause of pasture failure is grazing too early. This can occur in the early life of the new pasture or any pasture in early spring. Keep animals out of a pasture until there are at least 7 to 8 inches of growth. Young plants are easily damaged by horses' hooves earlier, and their root systems are not sufficiently developed to prevent the whole plant from being pulled out as horses graze. Avoid use of the pasture in early spring when the soil is soft. Sod will be cut by hooves and compacting of the soil will cause additional damage. Wait until soil is dry and firm before beginning spring grazing. Better yet, wait for 6 to 7 inches of growth.

Fertilize Annually - To keep a pasture productive, fertilize it annually. Start with a soil test. County Extension Offices have soil test kits and instructions. Base fertility applications on test results and retest every 3 or 4 years. Lime will probably be needed too. The soil test will also provide this information. Take horses out of the pasture when liming or fertilizing and keep them out for several days or until after a rain. The most appropriate times for making these applications are in the spring before grazing begins, or in the fall after grazing ends.

Manage Grazing - Many pastures are overgrazed, but a few are undergrazed. Either situation is undesirable. Unfortunately, seasonal growth variations also contribute to these problems.

Overgrazing is probably the more common problem for the owner of one or two horses and limited acreage. As a guideline, it takes about 1 acre of pasture to support one horse for an entire grazing season. Frequently, there are two or more horses on less than 1 acre. The available feed gets "eaten into the ground," and these areas become exercise lots. Not much can be done except to provide more space.

Undergrazing results from having too few animals in a pasture. Part of the feed is not eaten, becomes coarse and stemmy, and is wasted. The solution is to force the

Clip That Pasture - Regular clipping is one of the least expensive (but most useful) practices in pasture management. Clipping an entire pasture after a period of grazing removes the unused feed and allows all of the plants to start new palatable growth. Previously undergrazed areas will be grazed after clipping. Many weeds will be controlled, and droppings can be spread to dry. Clip several times during the grazing season.

Weed Control - Clipping will help to control weeds that appear in pastures. However, it will not remove all weeds. Those which persist in spite of clipping may need to be controlled by using herbicides. County Agricultural Agents have information about herbicides to be used in these cases. Remove animals from the pasture when herbicides are used and keep them out for the time specified on the herbicide container. Whenever using any pesticide, read and follow instructions on the label.