



Summer Time Horse Pasture Management

Summertime and the living is easy – your horses are out enjoying lots of nice, green grass! Your neighbors enjoy their view of your place; horse frolicking on green fields, grass plants swaying in the breezes. You're pleased, too, because you know your horses are benefiting from the healthy forage they're eating and your pocketbook benefits from reduced hay bills. The environment is happy, too; the abundant pasture plants put nutrients from the horse manure to good use and soak up any rain. That's your farm, right? Or instead, are your pastures a weedy confinement area? Do dust, flies and odors annoy your neighbors? Are your horses sloshing and slipping in mud when it rains? And there's that lake downstream. When it rains, what keeps the topsoil and nutrients from manure on your place from washing towards the lake? Sediments from runoff cloud water and nutrients can cause unbalanced vegetation growth. Contaminated runoff can also reach groundwater and become a human health issue as well.

Which picture would you rather see for your farm? If you'd like to have the first let me give you some ideas of how you can have and maintain healthy horse pasture for your farm – no matter what size place it is.

First, state-of-the-art horsekeeping no longer includes allowing horses on pasture year around. Most of us horse owners are not lucky enough to have the hundreds and hundreds of acres of open pastures which would be required for such year-around practices. Even if we did, most of our horses don't need that much grass. If they grazed that much most would be overweight, risking laminitis issues. For most of us in the Northwest, if we turn our horses out 24/7 we end up destroying our pastures. And poor pastures are a problem for all – for the horses, the farm, our neighbors, the environment and us.

So let's look at some of the pasture management techniques we can implement to make our horse pasture productive.

First, you can greatly improve the health and productivity of your pastures by creating and using a paddock or "sacrifice area" to confine your horses. A sacrifice area is a small enclosure, such as a corral, run, or pen, which is meant to be your horse's outdoor living quarters. It is called a





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sacrifice area because you are giving up the use of that small portion of land as a grassy area to the benefit of your pastures. Your horses should be confined to the sacrifice area during the winter and early spring when grass plants are dormant and soils are wet. In the summer you utilize the sacrifice area to keep your pastures from becoming overgrazed (never below 4") and to keep your horses from becoming overweight.

Rotational grazing is a technique you can use (along with your sacrifice area) to keep pastures from becoming overgrazed. Cross fence or divide up your pastures into several smaller areas. Temporary fencing is especially useful for accomplishing this. For a small pasture you might divide it in half or thirds, for larger pastures try breaking it into 4 to 6 areas. Choose one area to start grazing your horses for their allotted amount of time each day.

Next, determine how long to graze your horses each day. How much time you put them out depends on the following variables: how many horses you have, their age, weight, breed, if they are already adjusted to eating pasture, etc. It also is dependant on how much land you have. For most folks, once horses are accustomed to pasture you can turn them out for 2 to 4 hours once or twice a day. If you are fortunate enough to have productive pastures or a low stocking rate you may be able to work up to 6 hours of grazing time. Be very careful to not allow your horse to become overweight or eat too much grass when they are not accustomed to it. If you have any questions on this consult your veterinarian for his or her recommendations on the amount of grazing time recommended for your particular horse.

For my horses I have noticed it takes about 2 hours for them to consume a "meal" so I use that as a guideline. Here is a sample of the grazing routine I use on our farm. At the beginning of the grazing season (about mid-April) I gradually begin pasture-grazing time with my horses. I start with about an hour of grazing time and over a period of a month or more I work up to 2-3 hours per horse. By mid-June I usually have all horses grazing 2 times a day (morning and late afternoon) for about 3 hours each time. They still get a third (but smaller) feeding of hay in the late evening. Modify your own grazing routine to fit your horses, farm and schedule. You can choose to put them out once or twice a day, before or after work, or whenever it's convenient for you.





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When the majority of grass in one area is grazed to 3 to 4 inches remove the horses. The next day begin grazing your horses in another area. Continue this grazing pattern through out the summer. Allow horses back on pastures once plants have regrown to about 6 to 8 inches.

Once an area has been grazed, it is time for you to go to work as a grass farmer and get out your lawn or pasture mower. Horses are selective grazers, eating some plants close to the ground and leaving others untouched. Mowing “evens the playing field” by cutting the tall plants down to a size where they are more palatable. It also encourages grass plants to produce more leaves, or tillers, thereby making the plant stand thicker. Also, mowing is a very important weed management technique, as most weeds cannot withstand mowing. Set your mower deck at 4 to 6 inches and have at it!

Next, harrow (or drag) the pasture area to spread manure. Harrowing breaks up manure so plants can use the nutrients and organic materials. To accomplish this you can pull a harrow with your tractor or riding lawn mower. Or, you can simply take a manure fork and spread manure “by hand”. A wide variety of harrows can be purchased from farm and tractor supply stores or catalogues, or you can look in the back of horse magazines. Harrows with teeth or tines are more aggressive and can be adjusted to have more of a ripping effect on the ground. A basic harrow can also be simply made – a discarded piece of chain-link fence with two old tires tied down for weight works well. An old, metal bedspring, metal gate or similar item may also work.

Another pasture management technique is to have a soil test done for your pastures and apply lime and fertilizer accordingly. By following the soil test results you will reduce the chance of applying too much and having it wash off into the surface waters. Applying to the correct rate will keep you from wasting money as well. Only apply fertilizers during the growing season so that plants can utilize them and nutrients won't get washed away.

Over the winter keep horses confined to the sacrifice area and off saturated, rain soaked soils and dormant plants (this applies to summer storm events as well). Soggy soils or dormant plants simply cannot survive continuous grazing and trampling in winter months. Compaction of soil makes water filtration and plant growth very difficult. In addition, when the soils are wet, livestock hooves act like plungers by loosening fine particles of topsoil that can be washed away by rain.





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An important caveat is to remember is to begin spring grazing time gradually for your horse. Too much pasture can cause serious problems, especially in the spring when grasses are green and lush. Be sure to contact your veterinarian if you have any questions on the grazing schedule appropriate for your individual horse.

By utilizing these pasture management techniques you will be creating a healthier pasture. Healthier pastures mean more pasture productivity, which means less money spent on supplemental feed. Healthy pastures have the added benefit of making happier, healthier horses, a prettier picture for you and your neighbors – and a cleaner environment for all.

Good horsekeeping to you!

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