

Pasture Management for Small Acreages

By: Gabby Moore, DVM

Too many horses and too little land is a very common problem for many horse owners. The number of horsemen that own 20 acres or less is growing at a fast rate. Horse owners usually buy a few acres so they can care for their horses where they live. Pastures should be pretty to look at, provide the horse with free exercise and be a source of high quality forage. Unfortunately, few horse owners on small acreages have the agricultural background to properly understand good pasture management. Pasture management is even more critical when dealing with horses. Horses can quickly turn good ground into highly erodible areas devoid of any kind of good vegetation. Horses trample areas where they are fed, watered and congregate to the point of destroying all plants. These "sacrifice" areas can expand quickly. In addition, horses prefer tender, immature grasses and can crop these plants very close to the ground. Continual grazing like this does not allow the plant time to recover and it will eventually die. Soon, all that is left in a pasture that is continually grazed are tough, woody weeds.

Horse owners should spend some time learning good agronomic principles and planning management for maximum production. Selection of proper grasses for the climate, use and soil conditions, fertilization, removal of manure or dragging to break up manure piles, proper stocking rates, soil testing, weed control, and pasture rotation must all be part of the plan.

The first stop should be your local university agriculture extension office or the county or federal soils and crops specialist. Not only will they be able to give you a wealth of information for your particular farm but there may be cost share programs for pasture improvement for which you may be eligible. Planning should include an inventory of the plants present. Not everything green is desirable or even edible. Your local county extension agent can help you here and will recommend forage that is adapted for your area and intended use. Weed control, soil testing and soil improvement plans can also be addressed at that time.

A controlled grazing plan is the next issue to consider. It is vital to avoid overgrazing. Even one horse on ten acres can overgraze an area. Avoid overstocking. Too many animals on too little land can quickly turn good pasture into a barren, weed infested area in a short time. Cross fencing so animals can be rotated or kept off the pasture is essential. Cross fences can be permanent or temporary. There are lots of systems available to fit just about anyone's farm and budget. Again, you must become enough of an expert to identify the needs of the plants, rate of growth, climate conditions, etc. Forages should never be grazed closer than 4 to 6 inches or the height of a typical one pound tin can at which time they must be allowed enough time to regrow.

Good pastures are invaluable to your horse for both his physical and mental well being. It is not impossible to keep your horses happy and your pastures green if you follow a few simple steps.

SideBar: Principles of Good Pasture Management

1. Use soil testing to identify problems and bring soils up to test with lime and fertilizer. High fertilizer prices make composted manure a good alternative.
2. Drag pastures to break up manure piles and mow periodically so horses will graze more evenly. Rotate horses with cattle and/or goats for most efficient use of the land.
3. Don't overstock
4. Don't graze pastures continually. Get stock off pastures if plants are grazed to four to six inches.
5. Choose forages that will stand up to horse traffic and weather and soil conditions in your area.
6. Create a sacrifice area or turn out lots that can be used when horses must be kept off pastures.
7. Consider type of fencing to keep horses safe. Barbless high tensile wire can cause severe injury. Consider electric fencing, pipe or vinyl fences. Be careful to cap any steel T-posts. Keep all fences in good repair and tight.