

# Keep Horse Pastures Productive and Persistent

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Interest in horses is at an all time high in the United States. While there are many large commercial farms, the majority of horse farms comprise only 1-5 horses. No matter the farm size, a good pasture forage program should be an integral part of every horse farm.

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We are fortunate to have a number of excellent perennial and annual grasses and legumes suitable for so-called “horse pastures.” Perennial forages like bermudagrass, bahiagrass, tall fescue, orchardgrass, timothy and Kentucky bluegrass make up the foundation of many pastures. Adding clovers or annual grasses like rye, wheat, oats and annual ryegrass increases both forage quantity and quality. In addition, they can extend the grazing period of warm season perennial grasses such as bermuda and bahiagrass.

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This doesn't have to be the case. By following a few proven pasture

management tips, horse owners and pasture managers can maintain vibrant, productive and persistent horse pastures year after year. These include:

- If **establishing or renovating** to a new pasture, choose forages that are adaptable to your area. Your local extension office or farm supply dealer can provide information on forages best suited for a particular area. Don't necessarily opt for the cheapest forage. There can be major differences in forage quality and yield among varieties. For instance, toxic endophyte Kentucky 31 tall fescue seed can be purchased much cheaper than non-toxic endophyte Jesup Max Q fescue. However, the toxic effects of KY 31 on horses is profound, while no toxic effect occurs with horses grazing Max Q pastures. Also, if possible, only purchase certified seed. These may cost slightly more, but having a guaranteed germination and a list of any weed seed present is well worth the added expense.
- **Soil fertility** is essential for optimum production and plant health. Soil pH, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are key elements for forage growth. Soil samples should be taken every year or at least every other year to monitor soil pH, phosphorus and potassium levels. The local extension office or farm supply

dealer can offer assistance with taking and interpreting soil tests.

- While **stocking rate** can vary greatly due to weather conditions and season, it is generally recommended that a mature horse be provided with about 2 acres of perennial pasture. The stocking rate can be increased somewhat if supplemental feed is being provided or if annual forages are available.
- **Avoid overgrazing.** Overgrazing can weaken pasture forages making them more susceptible to drought and heat or cold stress. Weak plants are also much less competitive with weeds. It is generally recommended to graze perennial grasses no closer than 2-4 inches of stubble height. This allows enough leaves to remain on the plant to capture sunlight necessary for the manufacture of nutrients needed for maximum plant growth and health.
- If **continuously grazed**, pastures may need to be mowed periodically to keep forage availability uniform. Horses are notorious “spot grazers” especially if some areas of the pasture are allowed to accumulate large amounts of less palatable, mature forage growth. Mowing helps keep these areas producing tender, lush growth and also keeps down unwanted weed competition.
- Strongly consider **rotational grazing**. Under this system, large pastures are fenced into multiple

smaller paddocks. The horses are allowed to graze in the smaller paddock until the forage is uniformly eaten down to a desirable height. The horses are then “rotated” to another fresh paddock. Closely grazed grass quickly rebounds with lush new growth and renewed energy reserves within 2-4 weeks. If excessive forage accumulates, it can be harvested for hay or allowed to be stockpiled for early fall or winter grazing.

- **Distribute manure piles.** Horses tend to excrete feces and urine in selected areas in the pasture or paddock. They also generally avoid grazing in these areas. Scattering manure piles with a suitable dragging device distributes nutrients contained in the manure and spreads organic matter more uniformly across the pastures.

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