



Horse Environmental Awareness Program

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CONNECTICUT

Pasture: Planning, Seeding and Management

Benefits of a Well-Managed Pasture

- Reducing environmental impacts of your operation, including movement of soil and manure to water bodies
- Improving property aesthetics, which makes for good neighbor relations and increases property value
- Providing feed and recreation for your horses

Planning

In planning your pasture consider:

- total number of horses that will utilize the pasture
- proper grass height at which to begin grazing. This is usually about 6-8 inches
- necessity of grouping horses for turnout periods and size of each group
- desired length of turnout periods
- land resources available – is land lacking, or is there too much for your animals to keep it adequately grazed

Grass Needs

- Is there enough leaf area to intercept sunlight for photosynthesis?
- Are rest periods long enough following grazing to allow re-growth of leaves and to maintain a healthy root system?
- Is proper soil pH and fertility available to increase grass vigor and reduce weed competition?
- Is grass protected from hooves when soil is wet?

A rule of thumb is to graze animals when grass is 6-8 inches high. Rest grass when it is 1½-2 inches high. However, a Kentucky bluegrass and white clover pasture can be grazed beginning at 4 inches of height. Bluegrass is tolerant of shorter grazing heights, and clover will be stimulated by receiving sunshine.

Seeding

Seed in early April or mid August, mid September at the latest. August seedings are usually ideal because the soil is dry enough to prepare a firm, well graded seedbed and seeds germinate quickly in warm temperatures. Root development is favored due to slower top growth due to cool weather. Weed competition is at a minimum and moisture is ample as fall rains become more prevalent. Additionally you receive early use of pasture or a full hay production season next year. Recommended for Connecticut - Kentucky Bluegrass 10 lb, 6 lb orchardgrass and 1 lb ladino clover. Test the soil prior to planting and fertilize according to recommendations. Weeds and sod can be suppressed with chemical means (2,4D, crossbow) if desired. Do not graze until grass is 6 to 8 inches high.

Management

Resting pastures is critical! Recovery time for grasses ranges from 10 to as many as 60 days, depending upon season, weather, and soil characteristics. Generally expect to wait at least 14 days for grasses to re-grow to grazing height in spring, and 30 or more days in summer. A good rule of thumb for grazing in Connecticut is to avoid exceeding 7 days on any one paddock. To do this, divide your total pasture area into a minimum of 5 paddocks, and rotate animals to a new paddock at least once a week. This system will allow each paddock to rest for 28 days.

In springtime when grasses are growing quickly, you may need to move horses through the rotation faster or mow the grass in order to prevent plants from getting too mature and unpalatable before they've been grazed. If you make hay, you may choose instead to withhold 1/2 of your pasture from your grazing system so that you can harvest a first cutting from it. After re-growth, this area may be added back into your rotation system. Ideally, a paddock should be mowed as soon as possible after every time animals are removed and rotated on to the next paddock. If mowing is delayed for many days, new re-growth that occurs in the interim will be clipped off and wasted.

Soil test pastures to determine the need for fertilizer and lime, and follow recommendations. If pasture is new or has not received lime and fertilizer for many years, you may wish to test for 2-3 years in a row to establish

a healthy fertility level. After that, a test every 3 years is sufficient. Remember that if soil pH is too low, any fertilizer you apply may not be accessible to the grass, resulting in a waste of money!

Fencing

Animals should be fenced out of wetland areas, because they can cause damage to these fragile environments.

Consider

- Visibility
- Effectiveness
- Design – round corners rather than square are better
- NO barbed wire

Sacrifice Area

A selected area is sacrificed from the grazing system and is used to confine animals in order to protect pastures from over-use at critical times like during winter months, mud season, and times of slow pasture plant re-growth.

The benefits of a well planned sacrifice area include:

- hoof-friendly surface for better horse health
- reduction of mud and ice
- ease of manure removal/management
- improved aesthetics
- reduction of manure- or soil-laden runoff to water bodies
- reduction of fly-breeding habitat

What Makes a Well-Planned Sacrifice Area?

1. Minimal Size
2. A Good Surface - Replace the fine-textured "topsoil" with 8-12 inches of well-draining gravel with an assortment of particle sizes from sand and some fines up to stones of one inch in diameter. You may wish to top with stone dust or sand for a hoof-friendly footing. Some areas may require subsurface drainage where seasonal high water tables exist. Spots that are particularly troublesome due to heavy traffic or wetness may benefit from the use of geotextile covered with 8+ inches of gravel base and your choice of surface material.
3. Location - The most convenient areas are generally near the barn but the area should be located away from wells, wetlands, and water bodies. Strive for a minimum of 200 feet separating distance between a sacrifice area and a water body. Slopes of 2-4 % will reduce ponding of water, and will have less erosion than steeper slopes. A slope of 2% means that over a distance of 100 feet, the elevation will change by 2 feet. Grade the area to drain away from barns.
4. Daily Manure Removal - Regular removal of manure from the lot surface will result in less polluted runoff leaving the site, and will help to prevent the incidence of mud.

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