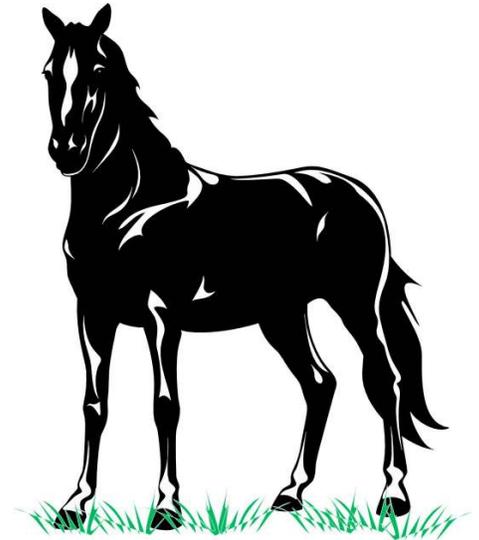


# HORSE PASTURE MANAGEMENT

By Dave Robison - Agronomist, Ampac Seed Company

Horses . . . mighty, powerful, majestic beasts of beauty. Although we picture a robust stallion or a brood mare in a lush green pasture, such a backdrop isn't reality for many, if not most horse owners. Most horse pastures are far less than lush. However, establishing and maintaining productive pastures isn't a difficult process. By following a few simple steps, most pastures can become lush, green, and quite productive.

The average horse needs about two acres of good pasture for grazing (that's per horse). So, if you own five horses, you will need ten acres of pasture to adequately take care of their needs. If grazing is not available, the average horse goes through about 17 pounds of forage per day (3 flakes of hay), or over 6,000 pounds of hay/forage per year. One acre of productive grass could easily produce that amount of forage. But, on a short, thin pasture it may take 12-15 acres to produce 6,000 pounds of forage.



## Management Step #1: Fertilize

A pasture can become very productive if the plants are fed. When comparing feed costs to maintaining a fertile, productive pasture, a few dollars spent on soil nutrients is a wise investment. Your cheapest feed is under your horse's hooves.

Before fertilizing, have soil samples taken to determine the pH of the soil and the levels of phosphorous and potassium. *(Note: Some horses are prone to a genetic condition called HYPP, which is triggered by potassium excess. Other conditions may be caused by soil imbalances as well.)* Have a reputable fertilizer dealer or extension agent evaluate your soil samples and recommend the best fertilizer for your pastures. Since horse pastures consist mainly of grasses, nitrogen applications will be very helpful. Generally it is best to apply up to 150 lbs. of nitrogen over three applications. For most regions this means 50 lbs. of N. in early spring, again in late May or early June, and finally again in September. Also, early December is an excellent time for a late fall application to stimulate tillering. It is one of the best treatments for an overgrazed pasture. Fertilizer applications will ensure ample grass production all season long, keeping your pastures healthy and prolific.

*"Your cheapest feed is under your horse's hooves."*

## Management Step #2: Practice Rotational Grazing

Every pasture needs a break to re-grow, recover, and be fertilized. This can be accomplished easily by breaking a pasture into two or more sub-pastures, using either temporary or permanent fencing. Ideally, horses should be rotated from one pasture to another when the pasture is grazed down 3-4 inches and the next pasture has grown to at least 6-8 inches. In the spring there may be too much forage growing for the horses to keep up with. If so, the number of acres being grazed needs to be reduced, made into hay, or mowed off. In contrast, summer rotations will be longer, and supplemental hay feeding may be needed. The more a pasture can be divided, the easier it will be to manage. Portable fencing can be very helpful for pasture subdivisions.



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### Management Step #3: Keep the Pasture Clipped

Even if you are managing your pasture well, you may still have times when the pasture gets too long, or certain plants remain uneaten. Not only do horses have a “close nipping” eating habit, but they are also very selective of what and where they graze. This causes some of the pasture to be overgrazed, while the rest is under-grazed. Keeping the pasture clipped will help reduce this problem and keep the whole pasture in the vegetative, edible stage. Use the easiest, most efficient way available to mow down the tall grass, weeds, and undesirable plants. Spot spraying with a selective herbicide can also be helpful for weed control.

### Management Step #4: Overseed When Applicable

Even good pastures thin out over time. New seed should be added annually to ensure that your pastures produce good grass. Existing grasses may re-seed themselves, but they probably won't be the ones you, or your horses are looking for. Naturally, the weeds will easily re-seed and spread. Don't wait until the weeds take over. Be proactive and regularly add quality forage seeds.



The best time to overseed is either fall or spring. Fall is preferable because the weed pressure will be less. Ideally you should “scratch” or disturb the surface enough to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. Sometimes spring is too muddy to harrow or let animals trample “hoof seed.”

In parts of the country where the ground freezes, a simple way to add new plants to your pasture is to “frost seed.” This is accomplished by overseeding when the frost is still on the ground (usually in early March). All you'll need is a broadcast spreader and seed. Red and Ladino clovers and some grasses (especially ryegrasses) are well adapted to this practice. (*Note: Avoid using Alsike Clover. It has caused horses to die from “Dew Poisoning.”*) Cool, wet spring conditions will allow for germination and growth of the seed.

A newly treated pasture must be handled carefully. The seedlings will not tolerate grazing until approximately six weeks after they have emerged. When choosing seed for new pastures or for renovating existing pastures, always choose an improved, endophyte-free and alkaloid-free variety. When selecting your seed species, research web sites like [www.pastureperfect.com](http://www.pastureperfect.com) to find out what species and varieties will work best for you. University forage experts, extension agents, and vendors can also be very helpful. Mixes like Pasture Perfect Renovator Special<sup>®</sup> from Ampac Seed Company were formulated especially for this purpose.

Horses are tough on pastures, but with proper management, basic “horse-sense,” and patience, you can enjoy a successful and productive horse pasture. Horses are beautiful animals, and even more so when they are grazing in lush beautiful pastures.

*For more information on pastures contact Dave Robison at [d.robison@ampacseed.com](mailto:d.robison@ampacseed.com), or visit [www.ampacseed.com](http://www.ampacseed.com).*

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