

Timely Tips for a Greener Spring

By Kate Norris, PWSWCD

Assess your pastures. Are you happy with the way your pastures look or are they more exposed soil than grasses? Overgrazed winter pastures can easily become a muddy mess as winter gives way to spring. Weeds can thrive in a stressed pasture in the spring. Planning and actions taken over the next few weeks can improve your pasture this spring. The following steps will provide guidance:

1. **Set a realistic goal.** For example, taking a pasture that is 50% bare soil and 50% grass and improving it to 75% grass coverage.
2. **Picture the desired results.** Visualization can motivate you to make some management changes and form new management standards.
3. **Start small if necessary.** Select one pasture to receive a rest and overseeding. Maintain the current quality of the other pastures by moving the horses to a sacrifice area (confinement paddock if necessary).
4. **Shop smart.** If you need to purchase seed, select the best grass type for your situation. Will a pricey ready-made pasture seed mixture really out perform an inexpensive bag of KY31 Tall Fescue? *Hint—timothy and alfalfa won't tolerate grazing*
5. **Work smart.** Know when and how to plant seeds. Clover responds best if overseeded in late winter while the ground is still freezing and thawing. Grasses such as Fescue, Orchardgrass, and Bluegrass will perform well if seeded March through mid April.
6. **Be patient.** Different grasses have different germination periods. It may take a couple of weeks after seeding for the new shoots to appear.
7. **Stay the course.** Keep horses off newly seeded pastures until the new grasses are 4-6" tall and the ground is dry and firm. Prematurely grazing the pastures, especially in wet conditions will quickly "undo" all your hard work. New grasses need time to develop an adequate root system. Graze too early and the horses will pull the plants out—root and all!
8. **Rotationally graze.** When your reseeded pasture is ready, add it to your rotation. Rotationally graze grasses that are 4-6" or more

in height and remove horses when the grasses reach no less than 2-4". Allow the pasture a period to rest and re-grow to the original grazing height by moving the horses to a new pasture or by rotating them into a sacrifice area paddock.

9. **Protect your investment.** Be wary of grazing your pasture too close or allowing the horses access in wet conditions. A short period of mismanagement can have devastating results.
10. **Seek help if necessary.** The Conservation District is available for site specific recommendations on fertilizer and manure application rates, liming rates, and seed selection. If you don't know where to start, or need a refresher course in pasture management, call us. All of our services are free to Prince William County residents and participation in all District programs is always voluntary. What have you got to lose—a little mud and future weeds?