

Late Winter Pasture Management: Frost-Seeding Clover

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February is an ideal time to “frost-seed” clover into a horse pasture. Adding clover to a predominately fescue, orchardgrass, or bluegrass pasture will increase the nutritional value of your pasture and can eliminate your need to apply nitrogen fertilizer because of clover’s nitrogen-fixing capabilities. To achieve these benefits your goal will be to create a pasture that is 25% clover and 75% grasses. You’ll need at least 25% clover in your pasture to supply your nitrogen requirement but keep in mind that a pasture that has a significantly higher clover content (40% or more) could be too rich for some horses and ponies.

The main types of clover used in horse pasture are red and white clover. The red clover is easily distinguished because of its characteristic purple flower color. White clover may be the large Ladino variety or the smaller Dutch clover. Both types of clover will serve the intended purpose but Dutch white clover is a low growing variety and persists particularly well under close grazing. Note: Red clover can cause “slobbering.”

Prepare your fields for overseeding by grazing the grasses closely to reduce competition with the new clover seedlings. Overseed 2-3 lbs. of clover seed per acre between late January and late February--the earlier the better. The freezing and thawing action of the soils this time of year will ensure the seed-to-soil contact necessary for germination. You can even turn horses out on the freshly seeded pasture for a few days and let their hooves help to work the seed into the soil.

When the soil warms up in March the seeds will sprout. Watch the height of the grasses in the pastures. If the grasses are growing quickly you may need to lightly graze the field to reduce the competition from the grasses. If the grasses are allowed to shade out the new seedlings your clover planting will be less successful.

The key to healthy, productive pastures is management including how and when you graze the pastures and also how you maintain the fertility level and pH of the soils in your fields. February is a good time to take soil samples in each pasture to determine how much lime, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium you need to maximize the production of existing grasses or to establish new grass seedlings. Once the samples have been submitted to the Virginia Tech soil-testing lab, you should have results within a few weeks. Keep in mind that spring seeding of cool season grasses (fescue, orchardgrass, and bluegrass) should take place between March 1st and April 15th.