

Embrace your vision for your horse property and achieve it on a budget!

By Kate Norris

Prince William Soil and Water Conservation District

What is your vision for your horse farm? To put it more concretely, as my friend Robin Lancaster of Blue Top Farm likes to put it, “when you look out your window with your morning coffee what do you want to see?”

My life as a conservationist began almost 10 years ago but my life as an equestrian began at the age of four when a friend of my grandparents, now in his nineties, took me on a trail ride on a pony named Trigger in rural Illinois. Summer rides on Trigger remained the highlight of my equestrian adventures until my parents FINALLY came to their senses and bought me my first pony at the age of eleven. Horses have been a part of my life ever since.

My love of horses and my career in the horse industry took an unexpected turn when I accepted a position with the Prince William Soil and Water Conservation District in 1999 to begin an outreach effort in our horse community. I've learned that natural resource conservation techniques (known as Best Management Practices) provide a commonsense approach to create horse farms that care for the physical and psychological health of our horses, maintain healthy pastures, protect community waterways, and make our farms aesthetically pleasing. Additional benefits include chore-efficiency and economical benefits from a practical farm layout.

Practicing what I preach hasn't been much of a challenge in the sense that I truly want a pretty, functional farm, happy horses, and appreciative neighbors. My view from the bay window wasn't as scenic six years ago as it is today. It took time, knowledge and then dedication to some very basic principles. My farm still isn't perfect but I'm pleased with what I see through my window. Here are the basic techniques to use:

- Soil sample your pastures instead of guessing if they need fertilizer, manure compost—this can save you time and money
- Develop a fertilization and seeding routine that is realistic and affordable— For example, lime is an invaluable input to increase grass production if pH is low but is not costly and KY31 Tall Fescue is a great seed choice for all except breeding farms, performs very well in a variety of conditions and is so much less expensive than pasture mixes with a horse on the bag
- Keep the number of horses you have to a reasonable stocking rate of no more than one horse per acre of turnout—savings here are obvious
- Designate and use a paddock or “sacrifice area” for winter turnout, wet weather turnout, confinement any time the grazing “lawns” of the pasture are down to 4 inches, and to manage your horses' weight—severe overgrazing will require costly pasture renovation later
- Surface your paddock with about 4 inches of bluestone dust or “pit fines” and keep it picked free of manure and uneaten hay etc. on a regular basis—pit fines

are usually less expensive than stone dust or may even be free except for the cost of trucking

- Locate your manure pile or storage facility 100 feet away from waterways and your well to protect water quality but make sure the location is chore-efficient—save yourself some time
- Fence horses at least 25 feet from waterways to create a vegetated buffer to naturally filter and slow rainwater flow; Install some interior fencing so you can rotate the horses between multiple pastures—consider properly installed electric tape fencing powered by solar energy that costs a fraction of the cost of more permanent fencing
- Place water troughs in areas that can be accessed from multiple areas either literally in a fence line and/or in a central confinement paddock to save money—ask us about our newest discovery, a water trough that is freeze proof, automatic and does not require electricity

Your farm has unique assets and maybe challenges. Develop and commit to your vision. Seek knowledgeable (and nonjudgmental) assistance to create your vision. Follow your own timeline and budget. Don't become discouraged if you make multiple mistakes—each is an opportunity to learn.

Please consider utilizing the free consultations, technical assistance, soil sampling, and planning services our agency offers. Seminars for small and large groups are offered and can be requested. Taxpayer commitments to a cleaner Chesapeake Bay fund our services. Inspiration and education, not regulation, is what you can expect from our staff of conservation specialists. You may contact us at (703) 594-3621 or pwsxcd@pwsxcd.org. We're ready to share your vision while respecting your time and finances.