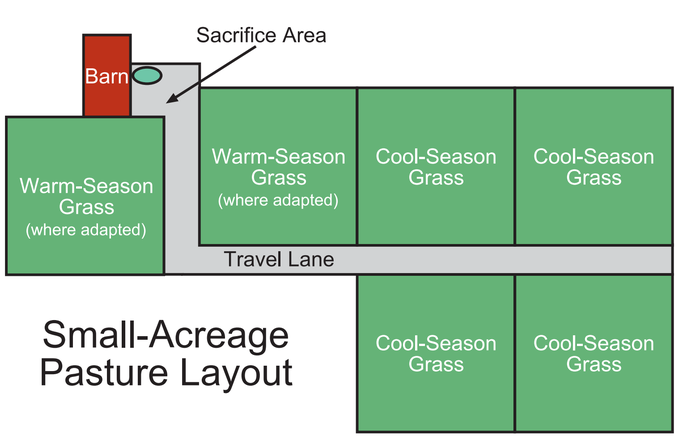
Maintaining Healthy Horse Pastures

C.D. Teutsch, Virginia Tech, and S.R. Smith, University of Kentucky

Well-maintained pastures can serve as an economical and high-quality feed source. Here a mature pleasure horse grazes contently in a field of annual ryegrass.

Horses can graze very closely. In this photo a horse grazes a bermudagrass sod too close.

Close and frequent grazing weakened this sod, resulting in a pasture that is less productive and more susceptible to erosion and weed encroachment.



This is an example of a small-acreage pasture layout for pleasure horses. The inclusion of a warm-season grass provides grazing during the summer.

Pasture Management

Once pastures have been established (18-24 months after planting), sound pasture management is critical for maintaining a healthy and vigorous sod that benefits the horse, owner, and environment.

SOIL TEST PASTURES. Pastures should be soil tested every 2-3 years in order to provide a baseline for tracking changes in pH and fertility.

MAINTAIN ADEQUATE SOIL PH. Soil pH can dramatically affect nutrient availability and plant growth. Maintain pH between 6.2 and 6.5 for grass-legume pastures by applying lime according to the soil test.

MAINTAIN ADEQUATE PHOSPHORUS AND POTASSIUM. Phosphorus and potassium should be maintained in the high range as determined by soil testing.

DISTRIBUTE DUNG PILES. Drag pastures to distribute dung piles and encourage uniform grazing.

PROVIDE 2-3 ACRES PER HORSE. If land area is limited, grazing must be controlled to maintain healthy pastures.

SUBDIVIDE PASTURES. Establish four or more pastures and graze them rotationally.

REST PASTURES BETWEEN GRAZING EVENTS. Resting pastures allows plants to replenish food reserves. Allow pastures to regrow to a height of 8-10". In the spring when cool-season grasses are growing rapidly, rest periods will be shorter. In midsummer when plant growth is slower, rest periods will be longer.

LEAVE PLENTY OF LEAF AREA. Do not graze closer than 2-4". Leaving plenty of leaf area results in faster regrowth and helps maintain a vigorous sod. Horses tend to graze some areas closer than others, so rotate horses to a fresh pasture when heavily grazed areas are at 2-4". Clip ungrazed areas of the pasture.

DO NOT GRAZE PASTURES WHEN PLANTS ARE NOT GROWING. Feed hay in a sacrifice area to avoid overgrazing pastures during the winter and summer.

REMOVE HORSES FROM PASTURES DURING WET WEATHER. Hoof action can seriously damage established sods during wet periods of the year. Place horses in the sacrifice area and feed hay when the soil is soft.

Pasture Layout and Design

Proper pasture design allows horse owners to control grazing. In some cases it is advisable to establish a permanent perimeter fence and cross-fence with temporary fencing until a suitable layout is found.

INDIVIDUAL PASTURES SHOULD BE SQUARE. Long and narrow or odd shaped pastures are not uniformly grazed.

PASTURES SHOULD BE UNIFORM. Pastures should contain similar forage species, soil types, slopes, and aspects.

HORSES SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO FRESH WATER AND SHADE. Ideally, each pasture should contain water and shade. In some cases lanes can allow access to the barn from all pastures (see small-acreage example).

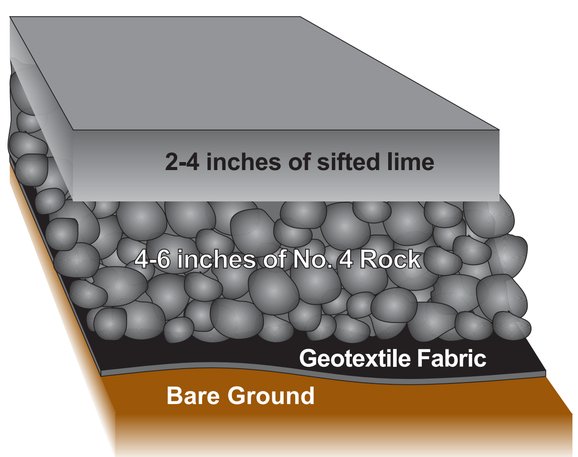
LIMIT ACCESS TO TREES. Trees should be fenced out to prevent girdling.

ESTABLISH A SACRIFICE AREA. Allow 600 to 1,000 sq ft per horse of well-drained area located near the barn. In most cases a rock pad will be required to keep area from becoming muddy (see diagram of rock pad).

USE ELECTRIFIED POLYTAPE TO CONTROL GRAZING. For this type of fencing to be effective, it must be electrified at all times.

Healthy pasture sods supply a safe exercise surface for growing foals.

Sacrifice areas often become muddy and require the construction of a rock pad.



Rock pads are constructed by placing geotextile fabric over the soil, covering it with 4-6" of No. 4 rock, and capping the rock with 2-4" of sifted lime.

Trees must be fenced out to avoid girdling by horses. In this photo an unfenced tree has been fatally injured.

For more information on maintaining healthy horse pastures, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension Office or visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension website at http://www.ext.vt.edu/resources/.

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