Good pasture management practices can easily double the total forage produced in a paddock. Good management can also greatly extend the period over which adequate pasture is available for horses without the need for additional hay. For example, horses grazing on a poorly managed grass pasture will require supplemental feed throughout the growing season; the same acreage of a well-managed pasture can provide sufficient feed for most of the same period. Adding a legume will increase forage production, reducing the need to purchase hay and grain. Additionally, horses grazing on well-managed pastures will remain in better condition and have improved health compared to those grazing on poorly managed pastures.

How do Horses Graze?

Horses are selective grazers, which affects the productivity of a pasture. Horses prefer to eat young, immature plants and will graze some areas of a pasture down to the bare ground. In other parts of the pasture, they will allow the plants to grow to maturity, which lessens palatability and nutrient availability. This grazing pattern is often called spot or pattern grazing. Horses will not graze in areas where they defecate.

Establishing the Pasture

Soil testing is the first step. Whether you plan to improve an existing pasture or seed a new pasture, you should first test soil pH (acidity) and fertility. If the pasture soil is not at optimum fertility and pH, any seeding has a low chance of success. The soil test recommendations will tell you how much lime and fertilizer your pasture needs.

Selecting the Pasture Species

Ideal pasture plants should be productive over a long growing season, highly palatable, aggressive, and adapted to climate characteristics of the area. No single forage plant meets all these criteria, so it is best to select several species to supply a uniform feed.

Permanent pastures are usually the best method for providing forages. Horses prefer grasses to legumes under grazing conditions. Pennsylvania studies showed horses preferred Kentucky bluegrass to taller grasses such as timothy and bromegrass. They also preferred clovers to alfalfa and birdsfoot trefoil. However, horses made satisfactory progress on all pasture
mixtures. Generally, permanent pasture containing legumes and grasses provides the highest yields of forage and greatest variety in the diet.

Grasses and Legumes

Kentucky bluegrass has earned its reputation among horsemen for producing high quality turf. It produces a smooth, tight, resilient turf that heals readily. Kentucky bluegrass properly fertilized is very palatable to horses under most conditions. The grass is high in protein and mineral content. It can be grazed closely or clipped to maintain high quality pasture. Bluegrass produces less forage per acre than do other grasses. Its growth slows down during the hot summer months.

Tall-growing, cool-season grasses such as orchardgrass and bromegrass are more productive during this period. Horses do not discriminate against these grasses unless the grasses become too mature. Stock your pasture with enough horses and if necessary clip to prevent excess accumulation of plant growth in May and June. This will help prevent the forage from becoming too mature and the sod from becoming clumpy. Orchardgrass and bromegrass will not tolerate close grazing. Always leave 3 to 4 inches of height.

Legumes. Any legume that is adapted to the soil and moisture conditions of an area can be successfully used as a legume in horse pasture. Horses don't bloat, so there is no fear of using alfalfa, ladino, or white clover.

Sometimes an excessive amount of legumes in a mixture will cause slobbering. If the amount of legumes in the mixture can be satisfied at about 35 to 40 percent of the mixture, slobbering will be minimized.

Selecting a Pasture Mixture

Keep seeding mixture simple. For best results use one or two grasses and one legume.

Suggested mixture for moderately drained soils: Alfalfa, 8 lbs., Orchardgrass, 3 lbs., and Kentucky bluegrass, 2 lbs.

Mixture for poorly drained soils: Ladino clover, 1/2 lb., Orchardgrass, 6 lbs., and Kentucky bluegrass, 2 lbs.

A mixture containing 5 lbs/Kentucky bluegrass, 8 to 10 lbs/smooth bromegrass, and 2 to 4 lbs Orchardgrass per acre will form a dense, productive grass sod when properly fertilized. Nitrogen fertilization of grasses provides earlier grazing in spring and supplies forage in fall when legumes should be rested.

Pasture Management

Begin grazing pure stands of bluegrass when 4 to 6 inches tall and graze back to 2 to 3 inches. Begin grazing tall grasses (orchardgrass, smooth bromegrass, etc.) when 6 to 8 inches tall and graze back to 3 to 4 inches.

If a legume is included in the mixture start grazing when the legume is about 8 to 10 inches in height. This will maintain growth and help maintain the legume in the stand.
Horses can graze pure stands of alfalfa, though with possible laxative effects. Do not put horses into a pasture for the first time when they are hungry. Usually alfalfa is mixed with bromegrass or orchardgrass to provide productive pasture for horses.

Use a pasture system containing a pure grass pasture for early spring and for fall grazing after September 15th. Use another legume grass pasture for mid-season grazing to provide productive high quality forage during the full grazing season.

Grazing Management

Manage grazing to benefit both horses and pasture. Pasture plants have high energy and protein contents until they begin to flower, or head out. Therefore, grazing management should be designed to prevent or reduce heading. Pasture plants that are grazed too short will have reduced leaf area and recover more slowly to produce less yield for the season.

Controlled grazing contributes to pasture productivity. The most common problems in managing horse pastures are over-grazing and under-grazing. This is because horse farms usually have a small number of large pastures. Large pastures become over-grazed in some areas and under-grazed in the remaining area.

In addition, horses bite off grass cleanly and leave short stubble in contrast to cattle that tear and pull grass and leave longer stubble. Lower growing species such as bluegrass and white clover are well suited to horse pasture since they are better able to withstand close, continuous grazing. However, birdsfoot trefoil, alfalfa, orchardgrass and bromegrass, are also well suited for horse pasture if rotational grazing is used. Removing excess growth as hay during periods of peak growth is recommended.

To improve forage quality, remove uneaten clumps, unpalatable growth, and weeds by clipping. Scatter the droppings to improve utilization. Frequent shifting of the salt, shade, and watering devices will help maintain pasture stands.

Stocking Rates

Make sure the stocking rate (body weight of horses per acre) is in the appropriate range. The stocking rate should be one 1000-lb horse per 2 to 3 acres. Horses eat in proportion to their weight; i.e. two 500-lb horses eat about as much as one 1000-lb horse if all other factors (age, sex, and activity level) are equal.

Grazing Horses with Cattle

Cattle and horses will eat around each other's droppings, but not around their own. So pasturing horses and cattle on the same land simultaneously or in rotation assures more uniform use of the pasture. This system also reduces parasitic infestation. Horses are not harmed by the intestinal parasites of cattle ingested when eating forage around cattle droppings. Each eliminates parasites which otherwise might ingest their natural host.

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