

Pastures for Horses

Pasture is used as a roughage for horses kept in pastures. Many horses are kept on native pastures of grasses and legumes. Pastures vary in nutrient content, depending on the growing season. The lush, green pasture growth of early spring is very high in moisture. As the spring progresses, the moisture content will decrease, and the nutrient content will increase. Once summer rolls around and the pasture matures, it becomes deficient in protein, energy, and other nutrients. It may be necessary during the later months of summer to supplement horses on pasture, especially if their activity level is high.

The geographical area in which you live will dictate the kinds of pasture grasses and legumes that can be grown. Certain species will grow well, depending on your location and the grazing pressure imposed. You should consult your county Extension office for specific recommendations for your area. Generally, a pasture should be a mixture of one or two grasses and one or two legumes.

Common warm-season perennial grasses are:

1. bermudagrass
2. bluestem
3. native grasses.

Common cool-season perennial grasses are:

1. orchardgrass
2. fescue
3. timothy
4. smooth brome grass
5. perennial ryegrass
6. bluegrass

The purpose of the pasture will determine the species of grass to plant. Remember, a pasture can be used as an exercise area or to supply a significant portion of daily nutrients. Each grass has certain characteristics that make it desirable for specific use. Kentucky bluegrass and clover form a sod that is resistant to close mowing and trampling. Tall fescue is suited for areas that have heavy traffic because it is most resistant to trampling.

By implementing a few management practices, pasture production can be improved. Fertilizing grass pastures can increase grass production. Soil analysis will determine the quantity and type of fertilizer needed to increase production. The proper combination of fertilizers will help maintain a healthy balance of grasses and legumes in a pasture.

High-quality pasture can only be maintained under proper grazing management. Pastures have to be grazed in such a way to protect and leave sufficient leaf area and root reserves to promote immediate re-growth.

Pasture Carrying Capacity and Care

Horses are notorious for spot grazing a pasture. In order to have uniform growth, a pasture must be grazed evenly. Horses should be encouraged to graze the entire pasture by moving water supply, salt, or supplemental feed buckets. If this technique is not effective, mowing the pasture at regular intervals to



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the recommended height will promote uniform re-growth. Chain harrowing the pasture to spread out manure encourages more uniform pasture grazing. Grazing cattle with horses or after horses if you are rotating pastures also promotes uniform grazing.

Minimum recommended grazing heights for grasses:

1. **bluegrass - 2" (5.1 cm)**
2. **native meadow grass - 3" (7.6 cm)**
3. **bromegrass - 3" (7.6 cm)**
4. **orchardgrass - 3" (7.6 cm)**
5. **tall fescue - 3" (7.6 cm)**
6. **bermudagrass - 2" (5.2 cm)**

How much pasture does one mature horse need? This can easily be calculated if you know how much a mature horse consumes in dry matter per day. A 1,000 lb (454 kg) horse consumes 25 lb (11.3 kg) of dry matter per day, or 750 lb (340.2 kg) per month. Forage production in a pasture can vary from 1 to 10 tons (907 to 9,070 kg) or more per acre per month. Your county agricultural Extension agent can provide data on forage production in your area. A good rule is a minimum of 2 acres per mature horse and 1 acre per pony or yearling. Remember that climatic conditions or geographical location may increase the minimum acres required per mature horse.

Pastures should be free from pits, holes, stumps, and other hazards that could injure a horse. Moles and gophers should be controlled to prevent tunneling. Tree limbs should be picked up regularly out of pastures to prevent injury to horses.