

Wildlife

Make your pasture a haven for wildlife as well as for horses. Encourage a mixed sward of grasses and wildflowers, plant, renovate and manage hedgerows, and protect trees and ponds from damage. An acre paddock which is evenly cropped to 2 cm, kept free of weeds and droppings, surrounded by wire, electric or post and rail fencing and where the soil is compacted by constant treading is a wildlife desert, and not as good for the horse as it might appear, lacking diversity and correct nutrients in the grazing. Take care in the use of fertilisers, sprays and ivermectin wormers which all have a detrimental effect on wildlife. Your pasture can be home to birds, bees and butterflies, bats, reptiles and amphibians and small mammals in happy relationship with your horse.



The GreenArc is a strategic landscape initiative aimed at significantly improving the environment and accessibility of the open space and countryside around London.

We envisage a pastoral landscape, made up of extensive farming with grazing animals, low input agriculture and forestry for the mutual benefit of people, wildlife and sustainable land management.

For more information on the GreenArc please visit: www.greenarc.org

FWAG is the leading independent organisation offering advice on farming and environmental issues. Increasingly horse owners are contacting FWAG for advice on paddock management and related issues. In each region, we now have specialists who can give advice on equestrian land management.

For further information please call your local FWAG office or contact us at :

FWAG Head Office, Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX

Tel. 02476 696 699

Email: info@fwag.org.uk or visit

www.fwag.org.uk



There are around one million horses in the UK today, utilising an estimated 800,000 hectares of grass.

HORSEWISE Horse Pasture Management

Horse owners and managers can make a substantial impact on the quality of the countryside in terms of landscape, history and wildlife, as well as attending to the welfare and wellbeing of the horse.

This guide will help you to deal with many of the issues relating to horse grazing, while helping to improve the environment around you.

The benefits of good practice in pasture management include:

- palatable and nutritious vegetation
- reduced costs in additional feeding
- extended grazing period
- no poisonous or pernicious weeds
- reduced worm burden
- reduced risk of mud fever and laminitis
- improved sward diversity





Basic Pasture Management

Pasture management varies according to the soil type, the vegetation cover, the season and the needs of the horse and owner. However, a few rules are common to all horse-grazed pasture:

- Avoid overgrazing – allow one hectare per horse minimum
- Avoid poaching the ground in wet weather
- Rotate paddocks frequently throughout the growing season, allowing approximately six weeks' rest between grazings – divide fields temporarily if necessary
- Cut ungrazed growth and spread the toppings at least once a year
- Manage droppings by picking up (wholly or partially) or harrowing
- Control injurious weeds



Fencing

Fencing must be secure, so horses cannot escape, and safe, so they cannot injure themselves. It should also fit in with the wider landscape. Poorly chosen and maintained fencing can be an eyesore, and even post and rail can look wrong in open landscapes.

The following choices of fencing can be made:

- Barbed wire, plain wire and stock netting are all unsatisfactory as they can cause injuries even when used with a top rail or electric wire
- Especially designed horse netting is one of the best options and is not unsightly; a top rail or electric wire is recommended
- Post and rail can be good in suitable surroundings – offset electric wire prevents chewing, rubbing and horses putting heads between the rails
- Permanent electric fencing is good in combination with other types of fencing but should only be used on its own for internal divisions, and must be easily breakable to avoid injury; consider solar energisers
- Avoid white electric tape – it is obtrusive, and horses see green, brown or dark red tape just as well; electric rope is preferable to tape
- Avoid excessive subdivision of pasture, especially with permanent fencing
- Plant native hedges against fences for permanent, windproof barriers in suitable landscapes



Latrine Management

Horses move off their preferred grazing area to form latrines, which they will not graze unless forced to do so by shortage of food. The nutrients in the dung and urine encourage rank growth of grasses and weeds which become unpalatable so that horses won't eat them even if the dung is removed. Latrines can spread until as little as 10%

of the pasture is suitable for grazing. To avoid the build-up of latrines:

- Ensure a large enough acreage per horse and rotate frequently to avoid build up of latrines
- Harrow in warm weather in spring and summer to spread and desiccate manure
- Pick up droppings on small areas at least once a week
- Cut ungrazed growth on latrines frequently and spread the toppings
- Graze with sheep or cattle as well as horses

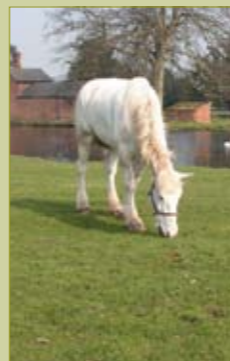
Mixed grazing and picking up droppings will also help to control internal parasites.



Winter Management

Horses can do serious damage to wet pasture, churning up the ground and destroying the vegetation cover. Annual weeds and grasses will grow back instead of the original grass cover, leading to degraded pasture. Some pastures are naturally more freely draining than others, but even on these there will be times when horses should be kept off.

- Ensure that pastures go into the winter with a thick vegetation cover
- Put suitable surfaces in gateways and around water troughs
- Avoid feeding outside
- Provide indoor or outdoor yards for exercise
- When dry enough to turn out, use the largest possible area rather than dividing fields



Laminitis

Laminitis is a potentially fatal disease of the feet, caused by overfeeding and rich grass. Grasses bred for high protein content, as in agricultural mixes, are high in fructans, a water-soluble carbohydrate. In general, the wider the range of natural species in grassland and the leafier the plants, the lower the fructans level. To avoid laminitis, ensure that the horse is not obese and feed a fibre-based diet.

In addition:

- Restrict grazing when fructans levels are high in spring and autumn
- Graze when levels are low, from late evening to early morning
- Don't graze on bright frosty mornings and in drought conditions
- Establish pastures with leafy grasses and a variety of herbs
- Don't graze the aftermath of a hay cut when growth is very stemmy
- Use grass based on timothy mixtures, not ryegrass



Manure Heaps

The disposal of waste from stables is regulated by law. Environment Agency guidance is as follows:

- Run-off from manure heaps, contaminated yards, stable washings and hay soaking should not be allowed to enter surface waters or watercourses.
- It is good practice to collect horse manure along with bedding materials and store it as manure heaps or so called "temporary field heaps".
- Temporary field heaps should be sited where there is no risk of run-off polluting watercourses. They should be at least 10 metres from a watercourse and 50 metres from a well, spring or borehole that supplies water for human consumption or for use in farm dairies.
- Permanent manure stores should have an impermeable base that slopes so that run-off can be collected easily in a sealed underground tank. The best option for disposal of manure is spreading it on land where it is of agricultural benefit.

Note that there are limits to the amount of manure that can be spread on land, and there are seasonal restrictions. Be sure that droppings collected from pasture are not stored near ditches or in hedge bottoms.



Weed Control

By law occupiers of land must control the spread of ragwort, curled dock, broad-leaved dock, creeping thistle and spear thistle. These are all problems on horse pasture, along with nettles, creeping buttercup, and (in some areas) bracken. Ragwort, the most serious, is toxic, and especially dangerous in hay. Creeping buttercup is mildly toxic but only while growing, and bracken is also toxic in large quantities. These species also take up space which could be filled by other more nutritious plants.

- Avoid creating bare ground in pasture where weeds can establish
- Dig up, remove and burn ragwort wherever it occurs (especially in hay), preferably in spring
- Cut other species before they seed
- Spot spray problem areas with selective weed killer – be aware of protecting water and species-rich grassland from the effects of spray



New Pasture

If establishing new pasture on arable land, choose a seed mix to suit your soil and your horse. Agricultural mixes are not suitable so aim for a mix of creeping red fescue, crested dogstail, smooth-stalked meadow grass and small-leaved timothy on all but the most acid soils. Wherever possible, species of native origin should be used.

Wild flowers such as yarrow and bird's foot trefoil can also be included. Newly sown pasture should be regularly cut during the establishment phase.

Old worn out pastures should never be ploughed up, as this both destroys the organic matter in the soil, which may take years to replace, and brings buried weed seeds to the surface, allowing them to germinate. If necessary such pastures can be lightly cultivated and oversown.