

Pasture Management



There are few things more beautiful than a herd of horses grazing in a green, thriving pasture on a sunny summer day. However, maintaining that pristine pasture is not always an easy task. To sustain a horse on pasture alone, at least two to three acres of pasture per horse is recommended. If you have limited pasture, a combination of hay and pasture can be fed. Proper management is necessary to keep your pastures healthy, lush and able to provide for your horses.

Sacrifice Paddocks

A sacrifice paddock is an area where horses are kept during wet or drought conditions and periods where there is insufficient pasture growth. The use of a sacrifice paddock prevents pastures from being destroyed by mud and overgrazing. Sacrifice paddocks do not have enough plant growth to support horses, so it is important to provide sufficient forage in the form of hay.

Rotate and Rest

By rotating your horses into different pastures (or from pasture to sacrifice paddock) gives the grass time to rest and recover from grazing. A horse can begin grazing a paddock at 6 – 8 inches. Horses can continue grazing until the pasture is at 3-4 inches. If you only have one large pasture, a useful tactic is to divide it into at least three sections using portable fencing.



Photo: Kathleen Kocmarek

This horse is in a sacrifice paddock. Note that while there is some grass available, it is not enough to sustain the horse. Hay must be fed.

Give each pasture a rest period. The length of rest period will depend on the speed of growth. For example, the rest period may be only two weeks in the spring, but six weeks in the summer. If you can't rotate your horses to another pasture, contain the horses in a sacrifice paddock and feed hay until the pasture has recovered.

Maintain

While your pasture is resting, you can help it thrive by mowing and dragging. Mowing weeds before seed-heads are produced will reduce the number of weeds in your pasture. Horses prefer shorter grass, so mow your pasture to about three inches. Dragging a resting pasture will spread out and break up manure, depositing nutrients evenly across the pasture and exposing parasites to the sun, killing them. This should be done while the horses are rotated out of the paddock.

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Reseed

Even the best maintained pastures will thin over time, allowing weeds to take over. Reseeding your pastures will help prevent this. If the pastures are well managed and not overgrazed, it may not always be necessary.

Test and Fertilize

Your pasture is alive, and like any living being, it needs to be fed. Fertilizing your pasture will ensure that your pasture will thrive. All plants need nitrogen, potassium and phosphate, and these nutrients may need to be added to your pasture. A basic soil test that measures pH, potassium and phosphate is sufficient for most pastures. While it may seem like an unnecessary expense, soil testing can actually save you money: you will only be purchasing the amount of potassium and phosphate that your pasture needs.



Photo: Kathleen Kocmarek

For more information on how to manage pastures, enroll in [Equine Guelph's Management of the Equine Environment](#) course.

Equine Guelph would like to extend thanks to the Ontario Veterinary College veterinarians and Joel Bagg from Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food for input and content review of this fact sheet.