

CROSS GRAZING ANIMALS

Grazing horses with other species such as cattle and sheep may help to reduce weed and parasite burdens. Sheep, like horses, prefer short grasses but they are ideal to use for cross grazing as they will clear up Docks and graze the rough areas that the horses avoid. As most parasites are species specific other animals help to reduce this burden by ingesting them whilst grazing and stopping their lifecycle. It must be remembered that whilst other animals help to reduce the horse parasites they will introduce parasites of their own and need treating for these.

If mixed grazing is to be undertaken boundaries must not only be safe and secure for the horses but must also be suitable for the other stock.

PASTURE IMPROVEMENT

WHAT TO DO AT DIFFERENT TIMES OF THE YEAR

SPRING

February - Analyse the soil to identify which nutrients are lacking from the pasture and therefore your horse

Harrow to remove dead vegetation this allows new growth and air to the soil, only in correct conditions

Re-seed any poached areas

Roll the pasture as the weather improves but before the ground completely dries out.

March onwards - Monitor weeds

AUTUMN

Apply lime if soil pH is less than 6

Trim back hedges and trees whilst they are dormant

Maintain existing drainage by keeping ditches clear of plants and debris

September - Ragwort control.

SUMMER

April-May - Weed control, especially ragwort.

Re-seed poor pasture

Fertilizers can be applied. Horses should not be allowed to graze the pasture for approx 3 weeks after fertilization. This period may need to be extended if it is a particularly dry season with a lack of rain.

June-July - Top the pasture to remove long, stalky grass and rough areas. Topping improves the pasture by encouraging the grass to establish a thick turf. Horses must not be allowed to graze the pasture until any cut grass has completely dried out.

WINTER

Hardcore may be needed if gateways become very poached

Rotate grazing to avoid poaching or designate a field specifically for winter turnout

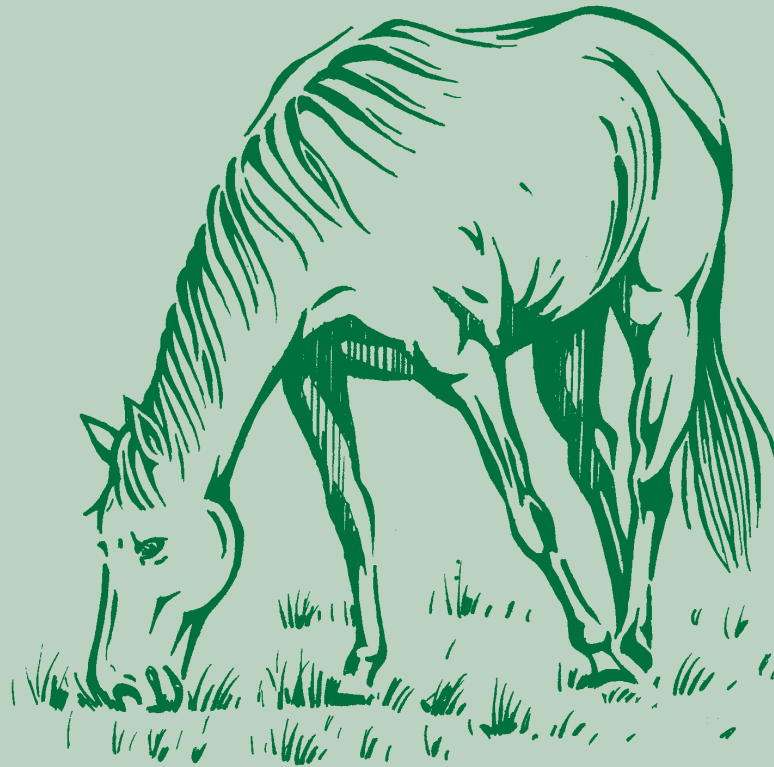
Restrict turnout if possible when weather conditions are very wet to prevent excessive poaching and health problems such as mud fever

Check water for ice daily

DAILY CHECKS

Should include: -

- Check boundaries and water supplies
- Ensuring gates are secure
- Remove faeces from the field
- Check for poisonous plants and remove
- Monitor the growth of the pasture
- Check for rubbish and dangerous objects and remove
- Check for Rabbit holes and Badger sets, section off if appropriate
- Check horse for injuries and monitor condition.



ADVICE ON

PASTURE MANAGEMENT



The British Horse Society
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PASTURE MANAGEMENT

The British Horse Society recommends approximately two horses per hectare as permanent grazing (1-1.5 acres per horse). A number of factors will affect this recommendation, such as:

- size and type of horse
- length of time spent stabled or exercised off the pasture
- time of year
- quality of the pasture
- number of animals on the pasture

Maintaining high quality pasture is much easier the more hectares you have available. The pasture can be split into paddocks, some can then be rested and managed to improve the pasture, while others are grazed and managed accordingly.

Horses are selective grazers making them poor utilisers of pasture. Over grazing and poor pasture management can result in the pasture becoming 'Horse Sick'. Horse Sick pasture develops "roughs and lawns". Roughs are areas soiled with dung and urine that become unpalatable to the horse, therefore horses generally tend to avoid such areas. Lawns are areas where horses constantly graze, resulting in patches where grass is minimal or non-existent. Weeds tend to take over these areas and deplete the soil's nutrients often leading to poor pasture quality and growth rate.

Responsible horse owners should remove faeces on a regular (ideally daily) basis to help prevent horse sick pasture and reduce the risk of parasite burden in their horse and its grazing companions.

FIELD BOUNDARIES AND GATES

There are many types of field boundaries available. The chosen boundary will depend upon cost, personal preference, resources available, field size, stock type and stock density. Regardless of the type of boundaries used it is essential to inspect them daily to ensure they are safe and secure.

As a guide, field boundaries should be at least 1.08m-1.38m in height. The British Horse Society strongly recommends that boundaries for stallions are higher and should ideally reach at least 1.25m-2m for added safety and security.

WOODEN POST & RAIL FENCING - This provides ideal fencing for horses and ponies. It is safe, solid, secure and is aesthetically pleasing. Post and rail can be an expensive type of fencing; it requires treatment with a non-toxic preparation, to prevent rotting and to increase its life expectancy. Regular inspection to check for rotting and broken rails is essential. Some horses may have a tendency to chew wood so this also needs to be monitored; there are products to help prevent this.

PLASTIC FENCING - This is a relatively maintenance free fence in comparison to post and rail fencing. It does not rot or require treating but may become weak and brittle over time. Plastic fencing is relatively new on the market compared to other field boundaries and this is reflected in the cost and availability.

STONE WALLS - In certain parts of the United Kingdom stone walls are widely used, they provide a very effective and aesthetically pleasing boundary. To erect from new they require highly skilled labour making them a very costly boundary. Stone walls are time-consuming to construct and maintain.

ELECTRIC FENCING – Electric fencing is extremely versatile. It can be used as a permanent or temporary boundary, on its own or in conjunction with another type of boundary. It is ideal for dividing pasture temporarily into smaller sections. Electric fencing can be attached to permanent wooden stakes, or to specially designed plastic posts. Electric fencing needs to be highly visible to prevent horses running into it. There are different types of materials used for electric fencing; the most common being white electric tape. Single strand electric wire should only be used in conjunction with another boundary type that is more visible. Electric mesh fencing is not a suitable type of fencing for horses. Electric fencing is cheap in comparison to other boundaries and is widely available.

HEDGES - Established hedges can provide an ideal boundary as well as natural shelter and windbreaks. They need to be well maintained in order to prevent them from becoming weak and gaps occurring. If this does occur it is essential that another type of fencing is used to secure the boundary. Newly planted hedges can take years to grow and become strong enough to be an effective boundary on their own. When they are growing it is essential that they are protected and fenced off from the grazing stock. Safe hedge types for horses include Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Hazel, Holly and Beech. Privet, Laylandi, Broom and Laurel are all poisonous and should all be avoided. Yew is deadly poisonous and any livestock must be prevented access. Elder is said to have fly deterrent properties but it is very invasive and will kill off the rest of the hedge

PLAIN WIRE – Wire in any form is not ideal for use with horses. If it has to be used it is essential that it is kept taut and ideally used with a top rail of timber.

STOCK FENCING (MESH)– This type of fencing should be avoided because horses may get their hooves or legs stuck in the holes. If it has to be used then a secondary boundary such as electric fencing should be put in place.

BARBED WIRE – This type of fencing should be avoided if at all possible as it can cause severe injury. If it has to be used it should be taut, and a secondary boundary such as electric fencing should be put in place to avoid the horses having contact with the Barbed Wire.

GATES – Gates are readily available made from wood and metals. Gates and gateways should allow for easy and safe passage for horses. Gates must fasten securely to prevent injury or animals escaping. If gateways become very wet and poached in the winter months it may be necessary to put down hardcore. For extra security gates should be padlocked, but easily opened in an emergency.

WATER SUPPLY

It is essential that there is a constant supply of fresh clean water available in the field. The most convenient option is self-filling troughs, though possibly the most expensive. Alternatives are buckets or other watertight containers that have to be filled up by hand or hose pipe. These do have the advantage that they can be moved relatively easily around the field if the watering site becomes too wet or muddy.

Containers must be large enough to hold sufficient water for all the animals in the field and sturdy enough not to be easily tipped over or broken. Regardless of what type of water container used it must be free from sharp edges and placed somewhere in the field where it is accessible for both the horse and carer. Ideally the water container should not be placed in a corner where horses could become cornered and injured by other horses. They should also be placed away from trees to avoid debris falling into the water. Water containers must be checked daily and cleaned out regularly to prevent a build up of foreign objects and algae. During the winter months it is essential that ice is broken to allow the horses constant access to the water.

Natural water supplies such as streams and ponds may seem to provide an easy and readily available supply of water; but they have their problems. Due to their unregulated source they pose the potential risk of pollution. There is also the possibility of them drying up without any notice and where the bed of the water supply is sandy there is a risk of sand colic. Where natural water supplies are available it is advisable that they are fenced off and an alternative supply provided.

SHELTER

Shelter from the elements should be provided for all horses regardless of their type or breed, and be made available all year round. Shelter from the heat during the summer months is equally as important as shelter from the cold, wind and rain during the winter months. Hedges and trees can provide good natural shelter in a field. Where natural shelter is not available a man made construction should be provided. This needs to be large enough to safely accommodate all the horses in the field. The shelter needs to allow sufficient head room, be of sturdy construction and be situated on hard standing in a free draining site. The shelter should be positioned with its back to the prevailing wind to gain maximum benefit. Planning permission may be required for certain types of shelter; therefore it is best to seek the advice of your local planning office before the shelter is constructed.

TYPE OF PASTURE

Seed mixes for equine pasture are widely available. Perennial Ryegrass forms the basis of most mixes as it grows very quickly and easily in varying soil types. A seed mix should ideally contain a good balance of early and mid season Perennial Ryegrasses and White clover as it is a valuable source of soil nitrogen. White Clover does require careful management; excessive amounts can result in the pasture being too rich for the horse which may lead to digestive tract problems and laminitis in the horse as well as an imbalance of nutrients in the soil.

Horses should not graze young grass until it is well established. Grass should ideally be 5-6 inches long before it is grazed. This allows it to establish a strong root system.

GRASS NUTRIENTS

It is very important that soil has all the nutrients it requires. Soils that are deficient in various nutrients will produce little grass of poor quality. Soil should be tested in early spring to analyse its nutrient content and pH levels.

Nutrients required for plant growth are: -

- Nitrogen- promotes rapid, leafy green growth and builds plant material
- Phosphorous- helps the plant produce seeds and root growth
- Potassium- improves quality and disease resistance.

If any of the above nutrients are deficient then a fertiliser can be applied to the soil. Care must be taken that the correct type and quantity of fertiliser is applied. Too much or the wrong type of fertiliser (such as a nitrogen based fertiliser) will produce over lush grass, which may cause digestive tract problems and/ or laminitis. It is always advisable to seek expert advice regarding

seeding and fertilising pasture. Once a fertiliser has been applied to a pasture it must be rested for at least three weeks, but ideally longer to allow time for it to disperse before the horses are allowed to graze it again.

For optimum grass growth the soil pH should be 6-6.5. A low pH reading will mean the soil is acidic and a dressing of lime should be applied to the pasture to raise the pH to the correct levels. Advice should be sought regarding this application.

WEED CONTROL

Plants such as docks, nettles, and thistles are generally considered to be common weeds. Buttercups can be an irritant to the skin and potentially harmful when eaten although harmless when dried in hay. Fields should be kept clear of such weeds as they discourage the grass to grow, reduce the area available for grazing, look unsightly and some can be poisonous. Some commonly seen poisonous plants on horse pasture include: -*lete*).

Poisonous Plants

- Bracken
- Deadly Nightshade
- Foxgloves
- Hemlock
- Horsetail
- Lilly of Valley
- Ragwort (*For further information on Ragwort see the BHS Welfare Departments leaflet on 'The Dangers of Ragwort'*)

Poisonous Shrubs and Trees

- Oak
- Privet
- Rhododendron
- Yew
- Box
- Broom

Horses tend to only eat poisonous plants when food is in short supply. Some poisonous plants are more palatable and toxic when dead and dried such as Ragwort and Foxgloves. Pasture should be inspected regularly for any kind of weeds and they should be dealt with accordingly. Prevention is better than a cure and good pasture management will go along way to elevate the weed burden.

Where control is needed, poisonous plants should be pulled by hand (always wear gloves and a face mask) and disposed of appropriately. Where chemical treatment is required it is best to seek expert advice and always read the manufacturers label about their suitability for use on horse pasture and how long horses should be kept off the pasture for after use. The application of chemicals generally requires professional equipment and expertise. There are a variety of weed killers available on the market, some products may kill all plants that they are applied to, others however are more selective and are plant specific. Chemical treatment can take various forms. For spot treatment a Knapsack sprayer is used to individually spray plants and these are useful for treating small areas. For overall treatment a crop sprayer is used to cover larger problem areas.

MAKE YOURSELF AWARE OF POISONOUS PLANTS AND HOW TO IDENTIFY THEM!

For further information see the BHS Welfare Department leaflet 'Advice on Poisonous Plants'

PARASITE CONTROL

Faeces should be removed from the pasture on a regular basis, ideally everyday. This will help control the parasite burden and prevent the grass beneath the faeces from becoming sour and unpalatable. Harrowing the field has a role in pasture management; it pulls out dead grass and allows air to the soil, it is not an effective method of parasite control. If harrowing is to be used to help control the parasite burden it should only be performed in extremely hot dry conditions or extremely cold and dry conditions. Larvae and eggs thrive in the damp therefore harrowing in these conditions will just spread them over a wider area. To make parasite control even more effective all horses in a field should be wormed at the same time using the same worming programme.

For further information on Parasite Control, see the BHS Welfare Departments leaflet 'Advice on Worm Control'

