

Planning Your Equine Pasture

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Spring is a good time to begin planning for an equine pasture. When planning a pasture, one should ask the following question: will the pasture be a major feed source or just an exercise area?

Most horses benefit from being outside regularly for exercise. Free exercise reduces behavior and respiratory problems, promotes optimal growth and development of young horses, and improves overall horse health. However, if the pasture is to serve as a feed source, other factors need to be considered including its potential nutritional value, carrying capacity or stocking rate, and grazing system design.

When planning an equine pasture it is important to consider the following items:

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHY OF THE PASTURE

Individual pastures should not include steeply sloping hillsides; soil types that vary significantly, are consistently wet, are rocky, or have dramatic differences in fertility; or forage species that differ greatly in growth or yield characteristics. If hills are part of the pasture topography, paddocks should not be oriented up and down hillsides, but across them.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Keep horses out of rivers, creeks, swamps, or wetlands. Poor pasture management in these sensitive areas can cause environmental damage. Wet areas should also be avoided because they typically have a greater number of insects (biting flies and mosquitoes) and poisonous plants.

PASTURE SIZE

Pastures should be large enough to handle the stocking rate (on average one to three ac/horse) and grazing system. For example, two or three one-ac pastures should be sufficient for rotational grazing of two adult horses. Rectangular shaped pastures tend to better suit horses as they encourage exercise. Irregular shaped pastures should be avoided because they create a greater risk of injury. If the pasture is to be used for year-round grazing, at least two ac/horse is needed; anything less should be considered an exercise area.

SACRIFICE Paddock/CORRAL

Dry lots, or sacrifice paddocks, provide an opportunity to move horses off pastures when they are excessively wet or dry to avoid overgrazing. Dry lots can vary in size, however they should provide a minimum of 500 ft²/horse.

GATE PLACEMENT

Gates should be placed away from corners, closest to the direction of travel. Gates should be large enough to get equipment through (i.e. tractors, mowers etc.). Narrow gates should be avoided because they increase risk of injury when more than one horse passes through. Avoid placing gates in low areas where water may pool.

WATER

Clean, fresh water is a requirement for horses. Place waterers in areas where filling and cleaning is convenient, and if possible, where multiple pastures have access.

SAFETY AND COMMON SENSE

Design safe pastures by using appropriate fencing materials for horses (i.e. barbed wire should be avoided). Pasture layout and design should be suitable for the horses and the farm.

Remember, management of horse pastures is an ongoing process that takes time, equipment, knowledge, diligence and money. If managed well, pasture will be an economical source of high-quality forage, as well as a healthy place for horses to exercise. If managed poorly, pastures can become overgrazed, allowing weeds to take over. A poorly managed pasture provides little nutritional value and may contribute to horse health problems.