Developing a Pasture Renovation Plan for Horses

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Horses are herbivores and, as such, the foundation of their diet should consist of roughages. In fact, equine specialists say providing only forage in the form of a high quality pasture or hay and a good mineral supplement is sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of many classes of horses.

No matter how large or small, a good pasture program should be the foundation of every horse farm. Developing a good pasture program involves much more than simply applying a little fertilizer periodically and giving the pasture an occasional mowing. Sometimes it means starting over and completely renovating the pasture. Reasons to consider complete renovation include:

1. To replace a toxic forage grass like toxic endophyte infected KY 31 fescue
2. To plant an improved, higher yielding or more nutritious forage
3. To use forages that extend grazing days and reduce purchase feed costs
4. To kill hard to control weeds like smutgrass
5. To level and smooth a pasture

If renovating a horse pasture, there are several management tips that can serve to help ensure success. Here are some options:

Choose forages that are adapted to your area. Fescue, orchardgrass, timothy and bromegrass don't perform well in areas where deep sandy soils are prevalent. Conversely, bahiagrass and certain hybrid bermudagrasses won't grow in cold climates. Your local university extension office or farm supply dealer can provide information on forages best suited for a particular region or area.

Don't necessarily opt for the cheapest forage. There can be major differences in forage quality and yield among varieties. For instance, toxic endophyte Kentucky 31 tall fescue seed can be purchased much cheaper than non-toxic endophyte Jesup MaxQ fescue. However, the toxic effects of KY 31 on horses is profound, while no toxic effect occurs with horses grazing MaxQ pastures. Also, purchase only certified seed. They may cost slightly more, but having a guaranteed germination percentage and a list of any weed seed is good information and well worth any added expense.

Match the forage to the soil type. Certain forages perform better than others on certain soil types. For example, bermudagrass performs best when planted on a well drained upland soil. It does poorly on wet, mucky soils.

Collect soil samples to determine existing soil fertility and pH levels. Use soil test results to apply needed fertilizer and lime.

Prioritize pasture renovation. Toxic pastures should be renovated first followed by unproductive pastures. It

may only be practical to renovate a portion (20% - 35%) of the pasture each year until renovation is accomplished.

Use a proven renovation practice. This is critical if toxic fescue pastures are being replaced. Toxic fescue pastures must be completely killed before any seed heads emerge in the spring. A smother crop such as hybrid pearl millet should be planted to grow during the summer months. This not only provides summer forage, but also helps ensure no toxic fescue plants escape kill and prevents toxic fescue seedlings from emerging.

Utilize summer & winter annuals to help offset forage shortages due to renovation. Hybrid pearl millet or winter annuals (rye, ryegrass, legumes, wheat, oats, etc.) can provide large amounts of highly nutritious forage for horses while permanent pastures are being developed.

Use proven grazing systems like rotational, strip or flash grazing to better utilize existing forage. Horses are notorious "spot grazers." Utilizing a grazing system helps prevent spot grazing and allows the grass to have a much needed rest period for regrowth and replenishment of food reserves.

Research and ask questions. Local university extension offices and farm supply dealers are good sources of information pertaining to forages and pasture management. Also, reputable seed suppliers like Pennington Seed Co. have forage specialists available to assist and a website, www.penningtonseed.com, loaded with excellent forage information.

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