

Managing fields for horses

Managing fields and how they are used, are the same regardless of the herbivorous species. However, horses have a particular type of behaviour and they have a preference for young grass. Making the right choices when it comes to managing fields and implementing certain techniques can optimise their use and yield.

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Technical level   



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Managing grazing

It is important to make good use of all the grass by adapting the load to the height of grass available in the parcel. The objective is a pasture with limited areas on which the horses refuse to graze.

Rotating or continuous grazing

To do this, adopt rotational grazing by subdividing the area available into three to five parcels that the animals graze on successively. The animals should only return to the same parcel after 25-30 days in the spring and 30-35 days in the summer. The grass can then grow sufficiently, and it is easier to manage areas that are refused.

If fertiliser is not used, 0.4-0.5 ha per livestock unit (LU), or two to five horses per Ha depending on the quality and density of the meadow. You either increase the surface area available in summer or reduce the number of horses by 30 to 50%, depending on how sensitive the area is to drought.

Overgrazing



Overgrazed meadow © J. Dolley

Daily trips by horses to the meadows, even when the load bearing capacity of the soil (its ability to withstand the pressure of the animal's feet) is reasonable, create areas of bare ground that are conducive to the development of weeds (or self-propagating plants) such as *Ranunculus* (buttercup), *agrostis stolonifera*, thistles, rumex, etc.

Overgrazing should, therefore, be avoided at all costs to prevent damage to the field. In addition, when grassland is overgrazed and conditions are dry and hot, regrowth is compromised. This is a disadvantage in a drought situation, which can be prolonged even when more favourable climatic conditions return.

You should be very careful with horses in this regard, by not letting them graze until the grass is too short and by giving them a new area of grass as soon as it reaches 3-4 cm.

It is not recommended to extend the grazing period on temporary meadows. They are sensitive to trampling and have a reduced ability to regenerate over the winter. It is often possible on much denser, permanent meadows with more developed roots, which strengthen the load-bearing capacity of the soil.

Resting parcels in winter

Always allow parcels a **winter rest period of at least two months**. The plants use this period to replenish their reserves. Too much grazing in winter depletes the grasses' reserves and the horses' feet leave their marks on the ground. During this period, earthworms aerate the soil. The plots must first be grazed

level and evenly and areas which the horses have refused to graze on must be mowed. They should be harrowed if the soil is uneven and if the load-bearing capacity of the soil allows a tractor to be used. For parcels that are used for grazing in the winter, their rest period should be postponed until the spring. In winter, if possible, group the animals together on a winter parcel or part of the parcel that has been sacrificed. This will allow the other surfaces to pick up again earlier in the spring.

Combining cattle and horses

Cattle and horses do not have the same dietary behaviour when it comes to grazing.

Cattle pick up grass with their tongues. They are less selective and do not graze the ground cover as short. They spread their dung over the whole plot, thus distributing the nutrients.

Cattle grazing tends to have a beneficial effect when their numbers are sufficient in comparison to horses (at least 20% of LUs, Livestock Units). They may graze simultaneously with the horses or, in the case of rotational grazing, after the horses to consume the plants the horses have refused to eat. This thus extends the time between two grazing periods for horses on the same plot.

Harvesting forages



Round bales © L. Marnay-Le Masne

Early mowing: not only are the stocks of better quality, but the meadows, which are less exhausted from going to seed, react much more quickly to rain.

Do not mow too short even if tempted to do so to increase yield. The 5-6 cm rule should be maintained to encourage regrowth.

Remember to consider wrapping the bales, which provides good quality forage and early regrowth.

In rotational grazing, only 50 to 75% of the area is exploited in the first cycle. Rotation is fast because grass growth is often explosive in the spring. Any parcels with excess grass are then baled.

Conversely, in the summer, grass production decreases considerably and the plots harvested in the spring are then integrated into the longer rotation.

Fertilisation

Fertilisation with nitrogen

- One fertilisation with a nitrogenous mineral on temporary or permanent meadows can be carried out in the spring. This enables you to obtain more grass earlier in the spring. When it rains in the spring, applying nitrogenous fertiliser also promotes regrowth in the summer.
- The amount of mineral nitrogen should be consistent with expected grass growth, the proportion of leguminous plants and previous applications of manure or compost.
- The case for fertilising with a mineral fertiliser in the autumn is more questionable. Indeed, mineralisation is significant during the summer (heat) and when the rains return in the autumn.

Organic soil enrichers

Regular organic fertiliser (manure, compost) is a means of providing organic matter, phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). These elements are necessary for the vegetation and to structure the soil, in particular to prevent it from becoming impoverished.

It is also a powerful way of making meadows resistant over time to prolonged periods without water.

Lime soil enhancers

The addition of limestone restores the neutral pH of meadows that have become acidic ($\text{pH} < 6$). Lime is usually added in the autumn. Quantities should be planned on the basis of soil analyses if possible carried out every four years.

Renewing fields

It is important to carry out a precise diagnosis of the fields and their level of productivity. Fields with very low yields or value must be renewed. Fields that have deteriorated should be replaced during August and September. They can be grazed as early as autumn if the weather conditions are favourable.

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