

Quality horses need quality grass

Grass management is an unglamorous but vital part of the equine business



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Workshops on equine pasture management were hosted recently at Bert House Stud, Co Kildare and Kenilworth House Stud, Co Tipperary.

Bert House Stud which is owned by Richard Young, and managed by Kirsty McCann, extends to 58 acres of limestone land. Stocking density is low and breeding, foaling and boarding thoroughbred and sport horses are the main activities. A sheep flock aids grass management.

Kenilworth House Stud which is managed by Gerry Ross, and owned by Diana Vasicek is a 200-acre farm, also on limestone land. National hunt thoroughbred horses are bred and raised there.

A herd of 16-18 broodmares and

cattle on loan from a neighbouring farmer are available to assist grazing management. "I like to keep the horses out as much as possible," says Gerry. "We place high value on grass quality which is determined by soil fertility and pasture management."

Soil testing

Soil sampling is the first step to achieving good grass cover on your equine paddocks and the most important stage in managing soil fertility.

Soil samples are easy to take and indicate your soil's pH and make up. Correct soil pH (6.2-6.5 unless high Molybdenum soil) and liming practices underpin nutrient availability and fertiliser effectiveness.

If your pH is too low you will not get the full benefit of applied fertiliser. A tonne of ground limestone per acre should increase the pH of a paddock by 0.3.

Many horse paddocks have not been tested in a long time so testing is key

to improving your soil fertility. And, if the pH results are good, you'll have peace of mind.

Fertiliser and farm yard manure

The grazing demand and requirement for forage conservation will dictate fertiliser requirements. Index 2 for Phosphorous (P) and Potassium (K) is adequate for lower stocked grazing whereas forage ground should be at Index 3 for P and K.

On equine paddocks, you shouldn't be using a lot of nitrogen as this can cause some joint issues for young stock. Use 10-10-20 or 18-6-12 on paddocks where needed.

Applying slurry and well-composted farmyard manure is beneficial. Check for parasites as well as nutrient quality before spreading.



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Weed control

Weeds can be a major problem on horse pastures. Combat them with good land and soil management. A pH range of 6.2-6.5 will allow the grass to grow and prosper and stay ahead of the weeds.

Don't overstock or overgraze paddocks as poaching and inadequate grass cover will give weeds time and space to grow. Compaction can also contribute to weed problems. Aerating and using appropriate rollers or harrows will help.

If you are still struggling to control the weeds you may have to spray. Adhere strictly to the instructions on the label and, if necessary, get a qualified person to spray for you.

Make sure the spray you are using treats the weeds you are targeting. After spraying, keep your horses off the paddocks for longer than the recommended time, just to be on the safe side, especially with pregnant mares. Any use of chemicals should bear in mind environmental protection and preservation.

Hygiene

The most common mistake is to overstock or overgraze pasture. The importance of hygiene both in the stable yard and within the paddocks can't be highlighted enough.

High traffic zones and especially those occupied by young and vulnerable foals are of the upmost importance. Rhodococcus is extremely prevalent in the country at the moment and other diseases such as Rotavirus are highly contagious.

Fencing off poached and dusty areas in paddocks and renewing surfaces in gateways and around water troughs will help protect the health of foals and others. Cleaning water troughs and maintaining good grass cover will help prevent disease. Disinfect where necessary using a product that covers viruses, bacteria and fungi.

These steps are relevant on all farms, no matter how big or small, and can help you avoid the need for expensive veterinary treatment.

Grassland management

Having started with your soil tests



Don't allow the grass cover to get too bare – horses don't like grass that is gone to seed so keep grass at a height that is nicely palatable



Teagasc group at Bert House stud. (L-R): Rachel Taylor, John Brophy, Patrick Farrell, Peter Doolan, Margaret Farrell, Martha Charles, Sean Keane, Richard Young (owner).

and appropriate fertiliser plan you also have to manage the grass. A good way to address the issue of too little grass is to rest the paddock rather than grazing down too low and poaching the ground.

Try and maintain grass cover as well as possible and don't allow it to get too bare. 'You need grass to grow grass.' Aerating may be an option. Avoid compaction from heavy rolling or heavy machinery.

Horses don't like grass that is gone to seed so keep grass at a height that is nicely palatable. You can manage the grass by closing off some ground for hay, allowing you to manage the other fields better.

You can also cross graze with other livestock. If you don't have any, there are always farmers looking to graze ground with sheep or cattle.

Another option is topping. This can be useful if you didn't want to run your horses with cattle or sheep. You could also top the field and run the cattle in for a couple of days to eat the toppings.

It's not a good idea to cut and leave the toppings on the surface. This can inhibit grass growth.

Keep in mind that some horses are prone to laminitis. These animals shouldn't be in big lush fields of grass. You can also employ a muzzle or adopt strip grazing.

Wormer resistance a growing concern

Resistance to wormers is a concern as there are no new wormers coming on the market. So do the right thing when it comes to worming.

Firstly, keep stables and paddocks clean as possible. That means good mucking out and also poo picking if possible, in your smaller paddocks with high volume. Paddock sweepers may also be used.

Manage stocking densities, rotate and rest grazing paddocks and cross graze with other livestock where possible.

Measure and treat worm burdens as follows:

- Test by taking a dropping sample and getting it analysed
- Talk with your vet and treat, if needed, with the most appropriate wormer
- Retest after two weeks to see if the wormer has been effective

Work with your vet to identify high shedders and come up with a plan. Blanket worming is not only a waste of

money but is also counterproductive.

Incoming horses should be tested immediately for worms and treated accordingly before being allowed to graze with your other stock. They could be a high shedder and you could have a big problem in a short space of time.

"Managing your paddocks effectively is a key part of grazing top quality animals," concludes Kirsty McCann.



Efficient, well laid out equine paddocks.