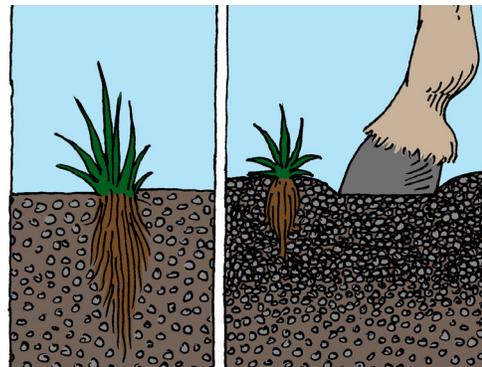


Five Tips for Spring Pastures

It's that time of year when the grass gets greener and grows fast! Here are some things to keep in mind before you open up the gates to the pasture:

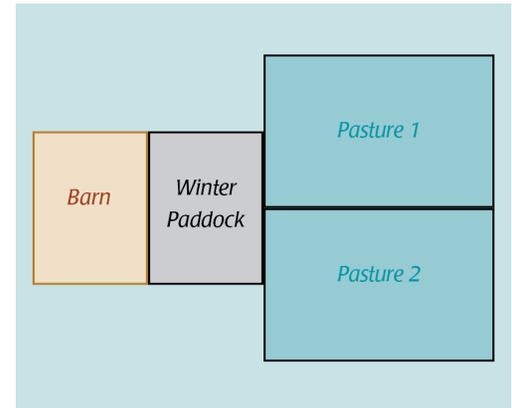
1. Keep horses off of pastures until soils are no longer soggy.

One of the most important aspects of pasture management is the time you keep horses off the pasture. Saturated soils and dormant plants cannot survive continuous grazing and trampling. When soils are still wet they are easily compacted, suffocating the roots of grass plants and doing long term damage to vital air and water channels in the soil. A simple test for sogginess is to walk out in your pasture and see if you leave a footprint—if you do, you know it's too wet and that the weight of a horse will be sure to compact the soil.



2. Don't let your horses have too much grass too quickly!

Once horses begin grazing again, limit turn-out time. Too much grass can cause very serious digestive issues in the spring when a horse's gut is not used to the change in diet. Start with about a half-hour at a time and work up to several hours over a period of several weeks. For any questions on how much grazing time is safe for your horse, consult your veterinarian for recommendations.



3. Use rotational grazing.

By dividing a pasture area into smaller fields and rotating horses through them, you can encourage horses to graze more evenly, keep pasture grasses from becoming overgrazed and guarantee fresh grass for a longer period of time during the growing season. Remember the golden rule of grazing: never allow grass to be grazed shorter than three inches. This ensures that the grass will have enough reserves left after grazing to permit rapid re-growth.

Consider the bottom three inches of the grass plant as an energy collector that needs to be left for the plant. Once horses have grazed the majority of the grass in a pasture down to three or four inches, rotate them on to the next pasture. You can put horses back on pastures when the grass has re-grown to about six to eight inches.



4. Do a soil test.

Fertilizer is almost always overused and may not be needed at all. Just because it's spring doesn't mean it's time to fertilize. If you apply fertilizer and your pasture grass doesn't need it, you've just wasted your time and money. In addition, that excess fertilizer will most likely be washed into nearby streams and lakes. The best way to find out if your pastures actually need fertilizer is to do a soil test. By finding out what your soil needs you will be able to choose a fertilizer with the right amount of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Contact the Snohomish Conservation District to get a list of soil labs, borrow a soil probe or to get advice on the best way to take a soil sample.

5. Seed bare spots.

If you have bare spots in your pastures, keep them from being taken over by weeds by growing grass there instead. Spread a little grass seed and gently rake it into the topsoil. Cover it with a thin layer of soil or compost and then lightly press the soil surface. This holds in moisture and protects the seeds from birds. For most parts of North America, a mix of seed containing Orchard grass, Perennial Rye grass, Timothy and endophyte-free Tall Fescue works best.

Questions?

Contact a Farm Planner at Whidbey Island Conservation District, 888-678-4922, or www.whidbeycd.org

This fact sheet is adapted from an article by Alayne Blickle, Director of Horses for Clean Water. For more information, please visit HorsesforCleanWater.com

