



December 2, 2016

HORSES ARE PICKY EATERS

More often than not, acreage owners try to reestablish small grass pastures. The story usually is such there isn't enough pasture for the horse or horses and the area went to weeds. What we need to keep in mind is horses graze differently than other livestock. They heavily graze specific spots and they are pickier about what they will eat.

Many acreage owners would be wise to feed hay year around rather than grazing horses on limited acres, which will likely destroy the pasture. On average in our area, horses need 4 acres per horse for summer grazing. In addition it is wise to have this area segmented off because of the picky nature of horses and how they graze. They can destroy forage in small areas by repeated grazing favorite areas of tender regrowth. Many times is it better to have a half acre or larger feeding and exercise lot and use other acres for hay production or short-term grazing when forage is more abundant or available.

The two grasses that are popular for horses are timothy and bluegrass. These are cool season grasses. Unfortunately, these cool-season grasses produce low yields and lack the persistence that we need. A better choice for our area is a mixture of orchardgrass and smooth brome grass. Add a little red clover, some white clover, and alfalfa to this mixture and you will have an excellent feed resource.

Native warm-season grasses also can provide good summer pastures for horses. Warm-season grasses that horses graze well include bluegrama, big bluestem and sand bluestem, sideoats grama, sand lovegrass, and indiagrass. A mixture of three to five of these grasses will make good summer grazing.

Avoid switchgrass and little bluestem for horse pastures. Horses do not graze these grasses very well. However, both switchgrass and little bluestem are consumed well as hay if they are planted in mixtures with other grasses and harvested before the seed heads emerge. If put up right and not too late, they can be used for horse hay even if they make poor horse pasture. Horses should be removed when the grass is at or above four inches in height. For brome grass most of the production is in the May and June period. For native grasses the growth period is in July and August.

One problem which is emerging is the increase of tall fescue in pastures. Tall fescue is a great lawn grass but in the pasture it will increase and take over a pasture in a matter of years. There is a very simple reason for this. The horses will not eat it unless forced to do so. The sharp hairs on the leaves hurt the horse's mouth so the grass seeds out and continues to take over for the readily eaten brome. When it gets so bad the horses are forced to eat it, they will lose weight and condition.

Native grasses can be established in one year if you dormant seed them now or seed them in April and idle the area for one year. I hedge my comment about one year establishment because of weeds. You can really increase your chance in one year establishment of native grasses by using Journey or Plateau herbicide about May 1st. It is labeled for establishment of certain warm season grasses and legumes.



You can only obtain Plateau or Journey herbicide from an authorized government outlet. Talk to Weed Superintendent John McKee in Fairbury at (402) 729-3602 or email jeffcoweed@diodecom.net

This herbicide really works excellent in helping establish native grasses without having to shred back a lot of weeds all the time. Please read and follow label instructions carefully on which grasses and legumes is safe when applied as a pre-emergent product and as a post-emergent product. Cost is in that \$3.00 to \$6.00 per acre range so it appears to be a good bang for your buck opportunity.

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