TOP TIPS – HEALTHY PASTURE, HEALTHY HORSE

Equiculture & The Equicentral System

A healthy, biodiverse pasture results in a healthier, happier horse

Horses have three essential needs: *Friends, Forage & Freedom*

Creating a healthy ecosystem for your horse to live in will help fulfill these needs and will have positive environmental benefits. Equiculture promote the below principles to help horse owners create a healthier pasture by working with natural processes rather than against them.

Horse owners are custodians of the land as well as their horse, and taking a ground-up approach to horse-care will result in a wide range of benefits. For more information, visit: www.equiculture.net/

DIET/NUTRITION

- Horses have evolved to graze for 12-16 hours per day. Their grazing should be high-fibre, low-sugar and low-starch to keep them healthy.
- Domestic horses often have a diet that is too energy-rich, which can result in obesity issues and laminitis.
- You should aim to avoid monoculture pastures and instead create a biodiverse pasture with a variety of herbs, legumes, sedges and grass species for a diet that's higher in fibre.
- A more varied diet will also help to improve the horse's gut biome, and will result in less reliance on supplementary feeding.

GRAZING MANAGEMENT

- Overgrazing should always be avoided.
- This will allow the pasture to rest and recover for periods in between grazing.
- To achieve this, there are different methods that you could try such as rotational grazing, strip grazing, block grazing, cross-grazing etc.
- As a general rule, if the grass length is <5cm, stop grazing. Aim for 15-20cm grass length before grazing again.
- Shorter grass is higher in fructans (sugars) than longer grass per mouthful. Longer grass is more fibrous.

GRAZING BEHAVIOUR AND BENEFITS OF PASTURE

- Grazing on healthy pasture promotes more natural movement, resulting in better circulation, joint health and hoof quality.
- Degraded pastures are often the result of overgrazing, and 'standing around'/'tracking' behaviours.
- Allowing horses to overgraze results in grasses becoming more stressed & higher in sugars/starch, which creates a health risk.
- Mud issues increase in overgrazed pastures, particularly in gateways. This is because bare soil is too compacted and contains no plant roots or air to help with drainage.
- Note – It is important to teach horses to self-regulate. Don't release a diet-restricted horse straight out onto a pasture with long grass, and instead aim for a gradual introduction.

REVERSING LAND DEGRADATION

- Good pasture starts with healthy soil.
- Degraded pasture can be restored through various methods, e.g. mulching (spreading old hay on bare ground to provide a medium for new vegetation growth – note, soil may need aerating first), or swales (barriers placed along contour lines on a slope to help slow and divert water/run-off).

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MANURE MANAGEMENT

- Considerations include minimising the risk of pollution caused by manure, reducing chemical usage, and controlling equine parasites (worms) safely and appropriately.
- If you are spreading manure back onto pastures, this should be composted first and should never be spread near waterways.
- Try to encourage Dung Beetles for natural manure management.
- Other methods of manure management are also worth exploring, such as harrowing.
- You can view the UK Government's rules and guidelines on manure management here.

HORSES AND WATER

- Poorly managed pastures can have a detrimental effect on waterways.
- Consider fencing off ponds to prevent poaching, and establishing riparian (vegetated) buffer zones to protect waterways. These will help filter out pollutants & reduce soil erosion.
- Consider using environmentally-friendly/biodegradable products for washing horses and gear.
- Creating swales (barriers) along contour lines will help to reduce soil erosion and encourage more vegetation growth on areas where mud is an issue.
- Rainwater harvesting can help to increase the efficiency of your water use.

VEGETATION

- As well as increasing pasture diversity, there are lots of other ways to further increase biodiversity on your horse property.
- Hedgerows can be used to create 'living fences', providing a wildlife corridor as well as providing shade and additional fibre for the horse's diet e.g. Hawthorn and Bramble.
- Trees in fields or along boundaries will provide natural shade/shelter.
- Corners of paddocks can also be fenced off and converted into wildlife havens.
- Pasture plants are efficient carbon sinks, and they also help to hold water and prevent soil from drying out too quickly.

THE EQUICENTRAL SYSTEM

- *'The Equicentral System utilises the natural grazing and domestic paddock behaviour of horses in order to benefit the land that they live on and the wider environment.'*
- It's a unique system that allows the horse to choose where it wants to be, encouraging more movement and reduced land degradation.
- It utilises a central surfaced holding yard with a shelter where hay, water and supplementary feed are provided. This reduces mud and compaction in the pasture (note – always check planning permission requirements).
- Visit the Equiculture website for more information.

If you aim to focus on two key areas – healthier soil and healthier pasture - then the rest will follow. Remember, you don't need to do it all. Even just making a few small changes will be beneficial, and while compromises often have to be made, we are here to help should you need any support or guidance.

For more information and clarification on any of the above topics, please visit https://www.equiculture.net/ and sign up to their online course for access to their full range of resources. To contact the **Surrey Wildlife Trust Nature-Based Solutions team** for advice, email nbs@surreywt.org.uk

Dung beetle © Chris Lawrence

Equiculture website:

SWT Nature-Based Solutions website:

Contact us if you would like further information on any of the topics covered here.