

Tips for Preparing Your Pasture for Grazing

Krishona Martinson, University of Minnesota

There's more to spring grazing than opening the gate. Here's a handy list outlining tips for preparing your pasture, and horse, for grazing.

Evaluate last year's grazing system. Think about how your pasture worked or did not work. Consider stocking rate, paddock size and shape, number of paddocks, amount of forage produced (i.e., yield), weed control, and fertility. Keep a grazing log and use aerial images to help optimize pasture growth and meet management goals.

Check fences. Over the winter months, snow and wildlife can damage fencing. Make repairs before starting spring grazing. Also, make sure all gates are closed and latched.

Check water sources and equipment. Ensure water sources and equipment are clean and in working condition.

Remove debris. Walk the pasture and remove debris that might have blown in over the winter months, including downed branches.

Take soil samples. Determine pH and fertilizer needs every three years. Soil sampling can occur as soon as the frost is out and the ground is dry. Collect one soil sample per 20 acres of pasture if management, topography, soil type, and plant species are similar. Sampling should occur from multiple sites within the pasture. You can obtain soil testing kits from your County Extension Office.

Fertilize. It is best to apply half of the fertilizer in early spring and the other half in mid-June, ideally before a gentle, soaking rain. Keep horses off the pasture until you can no longer see fertilizer pellets.

Control weeds. Spring is a good time to control annual weeds. Mowing is usually sufficient, but you may need to use a herbicide. Always follow directions and grazing restrictions listed on the herbicide label.

Evaluate horse health. Schedule annual dental exam and vaccinations with your veterinarian. Test your horse's manure to determine fecal egg counts and deworm accordingly. Proper deworming will reduce parasite load in your horse and on your pasture.

Let the grass grow. Keep horses off pastures until the ground is firm and grass has grown to 6-8". Once the grass has reached this height, start acclimating the horses to the pasture in 15-minute, daily increments (15 minutes the first day, 30 minutes the second day, etc.) until you reach 5 hours of grazing. After that, unrestricted grazing can occur. This gradual transition provides enough time for the horse's microbial populations to adjust, which reduces the chance of laminitis and colic.

Make adjustments as needed and consider rotational grazing. Grazing requires flexibility to respond to plant growth, which depends on weather conditions. Having a dry lot, multiple pastures, and practicing rotational grazing can help buffer adverse weather conditions. Rotational grazing also makes resting, mowing, fertilizing, controlling weeds, and dragging pastures more manageable.

