

Un-Managing Pastures

By Lynn Acton

I had the marvelous opportunity 12 years ago to design my own little horse farm on 10 unimproved acres. I researched and planned the placement of buildings, style of barn and turnout shed, size of hay shed, safety of fencing, how to develop the most nutritious pastures. We wanted to do everything “right” the first time. (Go ahead and laugh. We do, now.) The pastures were seeded with recommended proportions of various grasses and clover, and dutifully fertilized. The payoff came when we could look out a window and see our horses enjoying the yummy green grass. The kick in the gut came 3 years later when my beloved Arabian Bronzz foundered.

I did not understand why at the time, nor did the veterinarian who diagnosed him, though I now know that all the red flags were there. Bronzz was overweight, cresty, touchy about being groomed, stiff and creaky from inflammation in his joints. At the end of a cool wet summer, the pasture was lush and liberally laced with clover.

Much has changed in the 7 years since then, and horses who would once have been doomed to increasingly debilitating bouts of laminitis are instead sound and healthy. Equine veterinarians have learned to diagnose insulin resistance (IR). Owners have learned to manage IR horses with diet, exercise, pasture restrictions, and muzzles. There are special feeds and supplements for IR horses, some of which can be very helpful if you check ingredients and guaranteed analyses. (The best bets are usually feeds and forages with the lowest percentages of starches and sugars, and a supplement with high levels of magnesium.)

In sharp contrast to other developments, pasture management recommendations have changed little. A recent article in a popular magazine is typical. Focused entirely on how to create and maintain “lush” pastures with “thick, healthy grass”, it doesn’t even mention that such pastures are “overkill” for easy keepers. How did horse pasture management get so out of touch with the needs of horses? Traditional pasture management was based on the needs of cows. Dairy cows need rich pasture to provide milk. Beefers need it to grow on. Richer pastures mean more animals per acre, and higher yields. Pasture grasses were purposely developed to be high in sugars and hardy enough to outcompete lower sugar native grasses.

Somehow the obvious was overlooked. We don’t milk our horses, and we don’t eat them. Their digestive systems and nutritional needs are very different from those of a cow. Rich pastures may be useful in helping

little Thoroughbreds grow speedily so they can race as young as possible, but that doesn't make them the healthiest choice for all horses.

What can we do with our pastures instead? One veterinarian I know of has a simple system. Do nothing. Horses evolved eating marginal grasses. Easy keepers have a thrifty metabolism that is best suited to a pasture of native grasses and weeds (minus anything toxic). If you do anything to your pastures, add lime to counterbalance the effects of acid rain, which lowers the PH of the soil. A higher PH helps plants utilize healthy nutrients in the soil, such as calcium, magnesium, copper, and zinc. It also reduces the uptake of undesirable metals like aluminum and iron.

Those of us who already have "improved" pastures are in a pickle. Even if we were willing to "Round-up" the entire pasture, that would not kill the seeds from grasses that were previously planted. Those can sprout later, stirred up by natural hoof traffic, and outcompete any native grasses that grow. Research on how to establish less risky pastures for easy keepers has barely begun.

The one thing we have been able to manage is the clover, which is particularly dangerous for IR horses. The year after Bronzz foundered, our pastures were over run with it, and we dared not let him graze until we got rid of it. All of the grazing and herbicide specialists I consulted had the same answer. It's impossible to get rid of clover without killing everything in the pastures, and even then it would likely re-grow from seeds left in the ground. The solution came from a horse friend who owns a lawn service, and is thus familiar with herbicides. Cimarron Plus (Metsulfuron methyl), designed to kill broadleaf plants, killed the clover in our pastures without damaging the grass. Since it works on an enzyme level it is a danger only to broadleaf plants. Without the clover, Bronzz has more grazing time, with or without a muzzle depending on the season.

Ironically, after we tried so hard to create wholesome pastures for our horses, the healthiest pasture for Bronzz is the one that we never got around to "improving". No seed, no fertilizer. We limed whatever grew there by itself, and we treat it with Cimarron when the clover pops up. On that pasture his glucose is consistently lower than on the others. He says it's not the tastiest grass on the farm, but he will admit it beats wearing a muzzle or hanging out in the paddock doing nothing.

Resources:

www.safergrass.org

www.holistichorsekeeping.com (articles are under "Resources")