Grassy Green

Keep a close eye on your spring pastures to avoid weeds and possible equine health problems.

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Spring comes to the Southeast at different months. In some areas, spring arrives in February, while in other areas it doesn't show up until May or June. Perennial grass pastures respond to increased temperatures and moisture with a flush of new green growth. If the soil has been properly nourished, that growth provides a rich source of nutrients to the horse. Capitalizing on that asset is a challenge to every horse owner.

Spring grass growth can have 65% as much energy as oats and more than alfalfa hay on a dry matter basis. It is also a rich source of protein and minerals (Table 1). Remember that these are typical figures and can vary widely, depending upon soil fertility, moisture and maturity. Although the nutrient content of the spring growth on a dry matter basis is very impressive, this growth also has a lot of water in it (sometimes as high as 80%), so the animal's ability to meet his/her nutrient requirements from the forage might be limitedhorse eating grass by the ability to consume enough dry matter. The flip side of this restriction is that this grass usually has a high concentration of soluble carbohydrates (sugars). Overeating this forage can result in nutritional laminitis due to excessive carbohydrate intake. Managing the intake of spring grass is very important.

When you look out over the pasture in the spring, the green might convince you that winter is gone and with it the need to feed hay. Not yet. If you walk the pasture you might find that the green is only tiny shoots of grass mixed with a flush of spring weeds. Continue to feed hay until the horses start refusing the hay. This will get you through the transition period and the first part of the early spring grass growth. Horses that are exposed to this smorgasbord continually will usually not overeat the grass and will meet part of their dry matter needs with both the pasture and the hay. The hay serves one other function. Fresh green grass is very laxative. Hay will slow down the passage rate in the digestive tract and increase the digestion of the forage.

Stalled horses present another challenge. Because they are not out on the grass continuously, care must be taken to not let them overeat the spring grass when they are turned out. Fill the horse with hay before turning him out. Restrict his grazing time to ensure that he does not overeat. An hour might be suitable the first day. Gradually increase the time but be sure to

fill him with hay each day before he is turned out. An aggressive grazer can consume a lot of nutrients in a four-hour turnout.

Poisonous plants

Along with the flush of spring grass, you might get a some poisonous plants. Although most of the poisonous plants that grow in horse pastures are not very palatable, they will be consumed if the forage available to the animal is inadequate. Drought is often the cause of poisonous plant intake. Be sure to feed plenty of hay during drought conditions.

Many of the poisonous plants of concern to horse owners in the Southeast are transported by birds. Watch along fence rows for Nightshade, which is distributed by bird manure. This plant looks like a tomato plant with small black berries. Tomatoes, peppers and Nightshade are all in the same family. Pull Nightshade and other annual plants that might be toxic and discard them where livestock are not present.

Showy crotalaria is an upright plant with multiple yellow flowers. It is easiest to identify when it is mature enough to flower. Crotalaria is common in fields that have been renovated. Turning the soil brings seeds to the surface that might have been dormant for years. Mowing and spraying will suppress the plant, but the best solution is to pull and discard the plant when it is old enough to identify.

Other toxic weeds showing up in pastures: jimpsonweed, purple rattlebox, bitterweed, Carolina-jessamine, Chinaberry, bagpod or coffee weed, pokeweed, bracken fern, castor bean, black cherry, Carolina laurel-cherry, Johnson grass and cocklebur. Most of these will be in the fence rows. Care should also be taken to keep horses away from some ornamentals. Ornamental plants that are known to be toxic to livestock include: boxwood, hydrangea, lantana, castor-bean, elephant’s ear, oleander, Easter lily, and poinsetta.

Well established perennial grass pastures will suppress the establishment of poisonous weeds. Mowing the pasture on a regular interval will also suppress or kill most poisonous plants. Fence rows and any area where the established sod is destroyed are the most likely areas for poisonous plants to develop. A regular walk along the fence will let you see and destroy these plants. Pulling, cutting and spraying are useful control techniques.

Editor’s Note: A thorough online listing of poisonous plants in the Southeast (including photos of each plant) can be found online at: www.caf.wvu.edu/~forage/library/poisonous/index.htm

References:

West, E. and M. W. Emmel. 1995. Plants that poison farm animals. Fl Ag Exp Sta Bulletin 510A