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Catering for Horses Today

Pasture assessment and improvement– top 10 tips

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1. Knowing whether the soil texture is sandy, heavy clay or peaty, will help make decisions on how to manage the land for horses. If the soil is hard when dry and sticky when wet, it is probably clay. If it is light, easily drained and easy to dig, it is likely to be sand or loamy sand
2. Dig a hole and look; to see what the soil structure is like, you may not be able to affect the soil type and texture but you can improve its structure by mechanical, soil supplements and everyday management
3. Check the drains! If there is drainage in the field check all the outlets and make sure they are running freely
4. Test the soil for pH, this indicates acidity or alkalinity and determine whether lime is needed. Optimum pH for grassland soils is 6-6.5
5. Test for P and K, as grass growth improves at indexes of 2 and if nitrogen fertilizer is used the response will be higher if the pH and P & K indexes are correct. Use P and or K to correct the index by using straights or an appropriate compound and do not apply if it's not needed
6. If returning manures, make sure it is well composted or ploughed in to reduce weed contamination
7. Remember the grass growth curve, there is too little in the winter and too much in the summer! Set the objectives for the area and plan grazing and hay/haylage making and stocking rates. Use fertilizer with care and consider using other stock to control grass growth
8. If reseeding or renovating, select grass species and varieties to suit the needs of the horse enterprise – mixes for high quality haylage are very different from grazing for small native ponies
9. Avoid overgrazing, sward heights below 4cm will result in weed and 'gappy' grassland and avoid under-grazing, sward heights above 8-9cm will allow a build up of dead grass and poor re-growth
10. Check grassland for noxious weeds and poisonous plants.

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