

GATEWAYS

GATEWAY PROBLEMS

- Poor drainage
- Horses collect and stand around
- Frequent hoof and vehicle traffic
- Compaction and soil erosion
- Water pools

PLANNING NEW PADDOCKS?

- Don't site gates in corners
- Don't put them at the bottom of a hill (water drains into them)
- Make sure fields are drained using underground land drains
- Drains will eventually need rodding to keep them clear
- Drains need to send water into clear ditches (not overgrown, choked with weeds)
- Gates shaded by trees and tall hedges never dry out

GATEWAY SOLUTIONS

- Drainage
- Lay carpet to spread the load
- Bark chips
- Hard core provides standing surface and drainage
- French drain on the edge of hard core
- Lay mesh and top with turf
- Find agricultural contractor to do the job
- Plan for spring – gateways dry out and grass grows quick



A problem: Muddy gateways

The gateway to hell is full of mud for horse owners. From the mildest puddles to soupy bogs, wet, wintry weather makes leading horses in and out of paddocks unpleasant to say the least. It results in dirty horses, frayed tempers and lost wellies. Even worse, mud harbours bacteria which cause mud fever and thrush.

But one very-cost effective job with immediate visible benefits is protecting gateway areas. You can improve drainage, control soil erosion and spread the load, using options such as: laying carpet to spread the weight of traffic; adding wood chips and hard core to raise the surface and improve drainage; or installing specially-designed rubber matting covered by turf.

Muddy gateways occur because of soil compaction, and erosion caused by frequent traffic whether it's equine or diesel (paddock maintenance vehicles). Horses also tend to congregate where they think they are going to come in and be fed, churning up the mud as they jostle about. This creates low lying areas in and around the gate. Compaction then leads to poor drainage and as soon as it rains, water collects and pools.



Gates sited close to water troughs suffer combined wear and tear, as do those in field corners, leading to a greater expanse of mud, says ADAS senior equine consultant Geoff Fairfoull. He points out that mud is also not a great footing for horses: "Shoes can become loose or pulled off. It's physically more difficult to lead horses through mud and some finer breeds can end up with a strained tendon if they get stuck in heavy mud."

Old carpets can give a base to gateways, although they can look messy and cause a trip hazard, says Mr Fairfoull. Hard core will build up levels and drain the area; bark chippings may perform a similar function. Concrete is, however, too expensive for horse paddocks: "It may create a slip hazard as well, particularly where horses scramble to come through the gate," he adds.

Equine grazing consultant Garry Holter estimates that 75% of the horse grazing he sees has no form of drainage. "To maintain reasonable quality grazing throughout winter, you need to install underground land drains and ditches to get the surplus water off the field and into the nearest stream or river. Otherwise gateways will always be muddy," he says.



"Whether horses are conditioned to come in at a certain time, or they are cold, hungry or bored, they collect and stand around gates. Putting hardcore down isn't the answer: grass can't grow over it and horses don't like it – they just stand on the edge which increases the muddy area. Instead, use a flexible mesh (squares 1cm x 1cm) made from recycled plastic which comes in rolls 20m long and 2m wide. This helps spread the weight of the horse over a huge area. Lay the mesh on both sides and through the gateway, going at least 3m into the field. Cover with top soil, so only the very top edge is visible, and sow a fine grass mix over the whole area." *Garry Holter*

According to grass seeds specialist Rod Bonshor, from Oliver Seeds, gateways need a dense turf rather than the palatable, erect grasses used for grazing. "We use a combination of creeping red fescue and dwarf perennial ryegrass which can repair damage caused by frequent horse traffic. The fescue grows side shoots which spread along the surface and creep into the holes," he explains.

Sowing seed under a gateway mesh gives it the dark environment needed to encourage chitting and establishment. However, it can be sown on top as long as the seed is pressed into the soil. Seed needs to be sown sometime between March and the end of September to give it the best start. In the meantime, it's worth asking a local agricultural drainage contractor about installing a French drain. This is a drainage pipe laid in an underground channel, topped by stone until it meets field level.



A French drain

"It can be dug in the gateway, or where hard core fans out onto the soil, but it needs to lead to a ditch to get rid of the water," says Cheshire-based drainage contractor Roy Bradshaw.



Summer grazing is more easily managed than winter grazing

He suggests laying the drainage pipe 2' (0.6m) deep. "The drain shouldn't be laid too shallow or it will get crushed, but at 2' (0.6m) it will draw water from a reasonable surrounding area. Use 1.5" (3.8cm) clean stone (or gravel) on top – they are quite big stones, so the drain won't get clogged up as quick. It may still need clearing out regularly depending on the soil type. Sandy soil gets easily washed in."

A heavenly entrance to winter turnout is not guaranteed. But with good advice and a bit of planning, winter could produce fewer muddy problems for many horse owners.