

KEEPING YOUR Paddock SWEET

Keeping your paddock sweet is easy if you follow some basic rules and will make riding your horse much more enjoyable this year. By ensuring that your animal has the best quality pasture available, you can ensure that the pasture provides the nutrients required for good quality condition in your animal.

The key is to create a healthy and safe environment for your pony or horse which will pay dividends at competition time. Fitness and condition are more easily obtained if the basic raw material (i.e. the grass) is of good quality and is free of weeds and hazards.

The pasture maintenance checklist is to firstly identify potential problems, secondly to remove and rectify them and thirdly to dispose of any waste in the correct and responsible manner.

The first step is to identify any noxious or invasive weeds at all stages of their development, especially those prevalent in your area or field. The best known is Common Ragwort; a highly toxic weed and the best known of a group of noxious and injurious weeds. This deadly plant is very easy to spot with its distinctive yellow flower. It is highly advisable to identify this plant before it flowers to stop the plant dropping its seeds. Other invasive plants to look out for are Spear Thistle, Creeping or Field Thistle, Curled Dock and Broad Leaved Dock, Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Field Bindweed. Research on the internet, by reading magazine articles or by contacting the British Horse Society or DEFRA will help you to identify them. These plants can take over your pasture causing low nutritional value or in the case of Ragwort can kill your pony or horse.

Secondly, you must begin the task of finding the individual plants and also other potential hazards. The field in question must be walked in a criss-cross pattern, so as to cover all ground and will need to be repeated throughout the year to prevent re-growth. The condition of fences and gates, water supplies and trees must be assessed and any remedial action must be carried out prior to releasing your horse into the field. Fencing that is in poor condition can easily cause unnecessary injuries and potential hazards such as exposed nails and screws and loose planks and wire can easily be repaired prior to using a field. Exposed roots on existing trees must also be assessed and acted upon to avoid accidents. Access into fields must be made safe and easy to avoid injury.

The most effective time to remove any weed is when they first appear and their root system is not yet mature. It is much more difficult to remove a mature plant in the summer months when the ground is hard and compacted as the extraction of the entire root system is not guaranteed. For example, once the yellow ragwort flower is visible, then removing a mature plant is merely an exercise in crisis control as often the seeds have already been dispersed. These removal tasks must be carried out over at least a two year period as many of the weeds are biennial plants.

The removal of the weed itself may be removed by hand, or by using specialist tools such as the Fyna-Lite Multi Weeda. Once a plant is removed, pouring rock salt down the resulting hole can help kill any remaining roots. For larger infestations, agricultural herbicide and chemical weed killers may be used. Any weed removal must be undertaken with the correct protective clothing. The minimal protection required is thick gloves, long sleeved tops and long trousers, boots and a mask to avoid inhalation of ragwort pollen or other airborne particles. If ragwort comes into contact with bare skin, the area should be washed well with warm soapy water.

There are several specialist companies who specialise in the treatment and removal of invasive and noxious weeds. If you have a large and persistent problem, it may be a good idea to seek their advice.

Once the weeds have been removed, they must be disposed of in the correct manner. It is always best to contact your Local Authority or DEFRA. (www.defra.gov.uk) as they can advise on your specific requirements. Careful disposal of any weed is imperative as most weeds can seed after being removed and there is a high risk of seed dispersal during transportation.

Although field maintenance is usually a boring and laborious task, vigilance early in the season will reap huge benefits later. Compare the following scenarios; one animal turned out on good quality luscious grass in a field with a clean water supply and inspected and safe fences. Scenario two is of an animal grazing around and possibly ingesting toxic weeds on grass low in nutrients, which is unable to be ridden this season due to injuring itself on a rusty exposed nail.

Spending money on expensive feed supplements and purchasing expensive equipment is so easily wasted if the investment of time in your animals' immediate environment is not acted upon. It is up to you as the horse's owner or carer to ensure their environment is safe. The more time and effort you put in, the greater the rewards!

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