

Grazing Systems for Horses

When it comes to managing your pasture, picking the right grazing system for your horses can make a world of difference. It not only helps keep your horse's weight in check but also creates a more natural environment for them to enjoy, all while maintaining the health of the land.

For years, many horse owners have relied on traditional field systems, which often provide a basic setup. However, some of these setups can be quite restrictive, leaving horses with limited space to move around, graze, socialise, and exhibit natural behaviours. This confinement can contribute to issues like equine obesity since horses might not need to roam far to find grass.

Thankfully, there's a growing interest in creating environments that allow horses to express their natural instincts while still managing their weight effectively. Although changing your grazing system might not always be feasible—especially if you board your horse at a livery yard—there are some adaptations you can make that could benefit both your horse and the pasture.



Track Systems

Instead of the usual rectangular paddock that keeps horses confined, consider setting up a **track system**. This innovative approach involves creating a pathway around the edges of the field, encouraging horses to move while they graze. In the wild, horses can travel up to 30 kilometres a day in search of food and water, and a track system mimics that natural behaviour beautifully.

Setting Up a Track System:

To create a track, you'll run a fence—perhaps a temporary electric one—just a few meters inside your boundary fence. This pathway should be wide enough for horses to

graze together and easily pass each other. Place shelters along the track, and provide a wider area for horses to gather, socialise, and rest.

Enriching Your Track:

To make the track feel more like a natural habitat, consider adding enrichment items along the way. This can encourage your horses to move around and forage, just like they would in the wild. Ideas for enrichment include:

- **Hedgerows:** Plant horse-friendly greenery to add variety to their diet.
- **Forage Piles:** Create spots with hay, water, and supplements like herbs and minerals.
- **Diverse Terrains:** Incorporate different surfaces for rolling or resting, such as dirt and wood chips.
- **Obstacles:** Place small logs or branches to encourage investigation.
- **Scratching Posts:** Something simple, like a broom head on a fence, can be a delightful addition.
- **Treat Balls:** These can provide a fun challenge for your horses.

Make sure any obstacles allow elderly or less agile horses to navigate easily.



Pros and Cons of a Track System:

Pros:

- Encourages horses to move and graze throughout the day.

- Helps prevent poaching, particularly around gates.
- Acts as an effective tool for managing weight while keeping them active.

Cons:

- Can be labor-intensive and challenging to set up.
- Some horses might feel confined and stressed due to less open space.
- Opportunities for natural herd behaviour may be limited.
- There's a risk of trapping or bullying in certain corners.

Equicentral System

Another fantastic approach is the **equicentral grazing system**, which blends smart land management with the horses' natural behaviours. Research shows that horses like to graze in bursts, taking breaks in between. This system creates a central loafing area where horses can drink, eat, and find shelter, all while having access to multiple paddocks that are regularly rotated to give the grass time to recover.

By maintaining a healthy grazing environment, you allow horses to decide when to graze and how much to move throughout the day. This also minimises poaching in areas where horses tend to congregate, like near water troughs or gates.



Pros and Cons of an Equicentral System:

Pros:

- Over time, this method can improve the land's health, positively impacting your horses' well-being.
- Gives horses the freedom to choose where to go and when.
- Reduces poaching in areas where horses usually gather.

Cons:

- While most horses can manage their grass intake, some may struggle, making this system unsuitable for those needing strict weight management.

Strip Grazing and Rotational Grazing

Strip grazing is a practical method for controlling your horse's access to grass while allowing parts of the paddock to recover. This system involves dividing your paddock into sections using temporary fencing, allowing horses to graze only the designated areas. You can move the fence daily based on grass growth, the horses' appetite, and seasonal changes, ensuring that some sections rest and rejuvenate.

**How to Set Up Strip Grazing:**

For effective strip grazing, divide your field into three distinct areas: a recovering area, a grazing area, and a resting area. Aim for at least 10 meters for each strip. Once the horses have grazed down a section, move the fence about a meter out to create a new grazing strip, incorporating the grazed area into the resting section. This back-and-forth movement keeps your pasture healthy.

Considerations for Strip Grazing:

- **Strip Size:** Ensure each strip is spacious enough for horses to move freely and express natural behaviours without the risk of bullying.
- **Enrichment:** Like track systems, incorporate various surfaces and grazing opportunities to create a more natural environment.
- **Grass Management:** Watch for signs of overgrazing. Overgrazed areas can be high in sugars, which can be detrimental to some horses if they gorge on fresh grass.

By tailoring your grazing system to fit your horses' needs and the health of your pasture, you can create a thriving environment that benefits everyone involved.