

Keeping Your Horse in a Field

Keeping Horses in the Field: A Guide to Their Wellbeing

The Importance of Space for Horses

Where you choose to keep your horse can have a big impact on their health, both physically and mentally, even if they spend their days out on lush grass. Horses and ponies thrive when they have the freedom to graze and socialise with their fellow equines. Giving them plenty of time outside allows them to engage in their natural behaviours, which is essential for their overall wellbeing.



Field Setup Essentials

When it comes to keeping your horse in the field, there are a few important factors to consider: make sure the fencing and gates are secure, the grazing is appropriate, and that there's adequate shelter available for your horse.

Space Requirements

As a rule of thumb, you should aim for one to one and a half acres of land for each horse, plus an additional acre for good measure. However, it's essential to take into account the unique needs of the horses in your care. You'll want to consider:

- The number of horses in the field
- The size and type of those horses
- Your horse's weight
- The quality of the grazing
- The type of soil (is it well-draining or prone to puddling?)
- How well the pasture is maintained

- Whether your horse also has access to a stable

Overcrowding the field can lead to poor grass quality and soil, leaving you with a “horse sick” pasture. Plus, if horses have access to too much rich grass, they might gain unwanted weight, which can lead to health issues. You can manage this by implementing a suitable grazing system.



Fencing Matters

Having safe and secure fencing is critical to keeping your horse injury-free and preventing escapes. No matter what type of fencing you choose, it should be robust and well-maintained. Be sure to check it daily for any signs of wear and tear.

Choosing the Right Fence

When selecting fencing, think about costs, any existing boundaries, and the types of horses or livestock you may have sharing the field. If you plan to change the field layout or introduce strip grazing, flexible fencing options like electric tape and temporary posts can be a great choice for internal divisions.

Safety First

Avoid using barbed or plain wire fencing, as these can be extremely dangerous for horses. If you have to work with existing wire fences, consider lining them with safer alternatives like electric tape.

Here are some common types of fencing suitable for horses:

- **Hedging:**

Hedges can make for a lovely natural boundary and provide some shelter, but they can thin out in winter. It's wise to have a secondary fence for added security and to regularly check for any toxic plants.

- **Wooden Post and Rail:**

This classic option is both sturdy and visually appealing. It's easy for horses to see and helps prevent them from pushing through. However, it can be pricey to install and requires regular upkeep.

- **Electric Fencing:**

This is a versatile choice, especially useful for strip grazing. It's relatively easy to set up and can deter horses effectively when installed correctly. Just remember, temporary posts shouldn't be your only fence as they can easily be knocked down.

- **Stock Fencing:**

Ideal for mixed-use fields, stock fencing should have a small mesh to keep horses from getting their hooves caught. If your current fencing has larger mesh, consider adding another layer for safety.

- **Synthetic Fencing:**

Made from durable plastics, this fencing is flexible, easy to install, and weather-resistant, making it a great option for long-term use.



Gates and Access Points

Gates should be at least 3.6 meters wide and 1.25 meters high, swinging inward for safety. Metal gates are low-maintenance and easier to handle than wooden ones, but both are perfectly fine options. Adding a small mesh to the lower half can prevent horses from getting their legs stuck.

Make sure the hinges and latches are secure, and that gates can be easily opened without putting your horse at risk. If you're managing several horses, a double-gate system can reduce the chances of escape, especially where the field opens onto roads.

Place gates away from water troughs and shelter areas to keep these spots from becoming muddy and inaccessible during wet weather.

Providing Fresh Water

Your horses should have access to clean water at all times. Choose containers that are smooth-edged and easy to clean—automatic troughs or rubber buckets work best. Ensure there's enough water for all the horses to drink comfortably.

Remember to clean out troughs or buckets regularly, especially during colder months when algae and debris can build up.

Natural Water Sources:

While streams or ponds might look inviting, they can be risky as primary water sources due to contamination and safety concerns. If you have natural water sources on your property, consider fencing them off.

Shelter is Essential

Every field should offer some form of shelter from harsh weather and pesky insects. Natural features like hedges and trees provide some protection, but they can fall short in winter. It's important to place any man-made shelters in a well-drained area and position them to shield against prevailing winds.

Field shelters can range from simple windbreaks to fully enclosed structures. Just ensure they're spacious enough for all your horses and that entrances are wide enough to prevent any traffic jams inside.



The Social Life of Horses

Horses are social creatures and prefer to live in groups. It's crucial to provide at least one companion horse that's compatible in age, size, and temperament. If you only have two horses, have a plan for separation when one is taken out to avoid stress for the other.

Spending time with your horse is also key to their happiness. Regular grooming sessions not only strengthen your bond but also provide them with some mental stimulation. Even a good scratch while they're in the field can go a long way!

Adding Enrichment Outdoors

There are plenty of fun ways to keep your horse entertained in the field:

- **Food Exploration:**

Scatter small piles of forage like hay or oat straw around the field to encourage movement and exploration.

- **New Grazing Adventures:**

Take your horse on a stroll to new pastures where they can enjoy different grasses and herbs.

- **Curiosity Sparks:**

Place non-toxic branches in the field for your horse to chew on or scratch against.

- **Gentle Exercises:**

Use treats to encourage stretching exercises that keep them active and engaged.

- **Playtime Fun:**

Give your horse a play ball to kick around and unleash some energy.



Feeding Essentials

Grass is often the cornerstone of a horse's diet, whether fresh from the field or preserved as hay. In winter, supplement their diet with hay and possibly hard feed, especially if grass quality dips.

If you're using hay, it's best to spread it out in several piles or secure it in horse-safe nets to avoid conflicts. Hard feed can be served in rubber or plastic bowls that you can easily collect once they're done eating.

Rugging Your Horse

Many horses can thrive outdoors year-round without a rug, thanks to their natural coats and access to shelter. If your horse doesn't wear a rug, keep grooming minimal to maintain their natural grease for protection. However, rugs are essential for less hardy horses, the elderly, or those that have been clipped.

Ongoing Field Maintenance

Maintaining a horse-friendly field involves consistent care for the pasture. Establishing a routine for daily, weekly, and seasonal checks will help keep the land healthy and safe for your horses.

By following these guidelines, you can create a safe, healthy, and enriching environment for your horses, allowing them to thrive in their natural habitat.