

Paddock Maintenance

Below are a few tips and some information on the long-term care of your horse paddock. Paddocks are subject to intensive grazing and use and will benefit from a little tender, loving care. Paddock maintenance need not be complicated and a simple annual programme of work should keep the paddocks in good health

In early spring take half an hour to walk over and have a close look at your paddocks. What may look green and pleasant may well just be buttercup! Ask yourself some straightforward questions.

- Is the ground poached, rutted and in need of rolling?
- Are there any bare areas in need of re-seeding?
- Does the grass look vibrant & healthy?
- What evidence is there of any weeds?
- Does the ground look hard and compacted?

A simple paddock maintenance programme should be as follows:

- Collect droppings regularly
- Run chain harrows over the ground preferably twice a year in spring and autumn to remove dead thatch from the sward, to encourage aeration, reduce compaction and help drainage
- Rotate your paddocks. Try to give each one a rest for at least a month a year during the spring and summer. If grass is grazed flat constantly then gradually the plant will become weaker as the roots are not able to recharge their batteries by photosynthesis from the leaves and they may start to die leaving bare patches and allowing weeds to germinate
- Apply a light dose of fertiliser every year. We use 50 kg/acre of a general purpose 20.10.10. Whilst you don't want too much grass you are asking a lot of your paddocks being heavily grazed all the time to keep producing grass. A regular annual feed will help.
- Regularly inspect the grass and treat for weeds as necessary. Badly infested paddocks are usually the result of overgrazing and winter poaching. The best way to keep weeds at bay is an actively growing and healthy grass sward.

Poached and rutted ground.

Poached ground is caused by allowing the horses on to a field that is too wet. It will be especially noticeable in areas where they congregate such as around gateways and troughs. The easiest way to avoid this is by not letting them on in the first place however many people have very limited ground and this may not be practical.

Rutting is usually caused by driving over the ground with a tractor or 4 x 4. Avoid ruts by using a quad bike or fitting low ground pressure, wide turf tyres to your tractor. Rolling is very time specific: roll when the ground is too wet and you may cause even more damage and the mud will stick to the roller, too late and the ground will be too hard for the roller to have any effect. Rollers are cheap to buy and easily available second-hand. They are one piece of equipment every paddock owner should have so that they are available at exactly the right moment. They can be towed behind a normal 4 x 4 so you don't need a tractor. Get as heavy a roller as you can. If they are water ballasted make sure they are filled up. Drive very slowly and methodically, you may have to go over the area more than once. For ground that is very rutted the roller may not be up to the job and you might need to use a rotovator

or power harrow. These will level off badly rutted areas. Once harrowed roll the area then sow grass seed and roll it in. Keep the horses off the area until the grass has germinated and is growing strongly.

Bare areas & Reseeding

These may be due to poaching, poor drainage or the result of a successful weed spray. Reseeding is best done in March/April time or September when there is warmth to encourage germination, the likelihood of some rain and no risk of frost. Grass seed is notorious for going off quickly so buy fresh each time. Most suppliers sell acre packs of a good paddock mix. Lightly cultivate with a chain harrow to break up the surface a little and then sow seed. Divide the seed you have allowed into two equal amounts and then sow each at right angles to the other. This should ensure a good even cover. Do this whether sowing by hand or with a spinner. Roll it in and try to keep the horses off it until it is established.

Weed Control

The best way to control weeds is an actively growing, healthy grass sward to out compete weeds. Wet winters, over grazing and poaching usually lead to weed problems in early spring, particularly buttercup. The key to good weed control is spraying when the weeds are actively growing, that means a combination of warmth and moisture. Generally, we find that late April/early May is the best time to begin.

We generally use a tank mix of 3 different pesticides recommended by our Agronomist to provide a broad spectrum control of most paddock weeds. However, we can tailor this to your particular requirements to minimise pesticide use if, for instance, your only weed problem is Thistles.

If you have any areas of wild flowers etc. that you want to keep you do need to point these out to us on site so we can avoid them. If your paddock is very overgrown and the weeds are tall it may be better to mow it first then respray the young weeds 2-3 weeks later. We also need a window of 12 hours of dry weather to ensure that the weeds have chance to absorb the herbicide.

Generally speaking you will need to allow to keep all grazing animals off the sprayed area for at least 14 days or until poisonous vegetation such as Ragwort has become completely unpalatable to them.

Ragwort

For detailed information on Ragwort please see the Ragwort information sheet ([Link to Ragwort page](#)). Ragwort rosettes should be easily visible amongst short grass. If Ragwort is present, then we will use a herbicide called Thrust which contains 2,4 D. Although it does a good job on Ragwort, we have found it less successful on some other weeds such as thistle and nettle, which is why we use a tank mix of pesticide in these cases. You will need to keep grazing animals off the paddock for at least 14 days after we have used Thrust or until all poisonous vegetation has become unpalatable.

We are very confident about our spraying regime and our skill at applying them and guarantee all applications. If it doesn't work, we will come back and re-spray free of charge, however, please note they will only kill actively growing weeds, they will have no effect on subsequent re-growth from seed and some tough plants like Ragwort and established Docks may need a second application. We are happy to supply and apply other herbicides for other particular weed applications or apply herbicides you may have bought yourself if they are safe and legal to use.

We try to be as competitive as possible and prices reflect the overall area to spray and the herbicide required. For small acreage we charge **£55.00 including** herbicide + Vat. There are economies of scale and we are pleased to quote for larger areas over 10 acres to supply and apply the herbicide. Our operators are all certified to National Proficiency Tests Council standards and we carry £5 million public liability insurance.

Hard and compacted ground

This can be tricky to deal with without major work. Initially do not overgraze or have too many horses per acre. Heavy chain harrows (you can increase the weight of existing ones by placing railway sleepers or similar on top of them whilst in use) should be used to break up the surface. This should help allow better drainage and let air, water and nutrients reach the roots of the grass. Time the harrowing when the ground is soft. Apply fertiliser to give the grass a boost. If this fails, then you may need to consider specialist machinery. Aerators punch holes into the ground or in more severe cases a mole plough can be used to break up underlying compaction.

Fencing

We can supply and erect all forms of post and rail and post and wire fences for horses. We will be pleased to visit, advise, measure and give you a quotation. In most cases trying to patch up an existing old fence is not worth the effort. We often find it takes longer to do this than put up an entirely new fence. Old fence posts and rails become brittle with age, rusted wire becomes weaker and trying to straighten them or re-tension wire can cause them to break.

What to do next

If you would like your paddocks sprayed, fertilised or harrowed please just give us a ring to book the work. We normally start spraying around the end of April and work on a first come first served basis. All contact details including email are on the web site. If you have a particular query or problem, you would like to discuss just call us.