

ROTATIONAL GRAZING FOR HORSE FARMS FOR HEALTHIER HORSES, PASTURES, AND THE ENVIRONMENT



If you're a horse farm owner with limited pasture, you've probably seen how quickly horses can wear out a field. They're selective grazers with heavy bodies and love to overgraze their favorite pasture grasses

down to the roots, leaving behind weeds, bare spots, and compacted soil. This not only reduces pasture productivity but also increases your feed bill and contributes to soil erosion and water pollution.

Rotational grazing is a simple, effective way to grow more grass, cut feed costs, and create a healthier environment for your horses and your land. It gives pastures time to rest and regrow, which means:

- Better forage quality and less need for hay and grain
- Healthier horses with more natural grazing time
- Fewer weeds, less mud, and more evenly distributed manure
- Stronger pastures that last longer and need fewer repairs
- Cleaner water and healthier soil

HOW ROTATIONAL GRAZING WORKS

Rotational grazing simply means dividing your large pasture into smaller fenced pastures or paddocks and rotating your herd of horses through them based on grass availability and weather. While one paddock is being grazed, the others are resting and regrowing.

Here's a basic framework:

- Allow horses to graze the grasses to ~3 inches, then move the horses to another pasture that has been rested.
- Rest that pasture until the grass regrows to 6–8 inches before returning.
- Rest periods may take a few weeks, depending on the season and regrowth rate.
- The smaller your paddocks, the more carefully you'll need to manage them.
- When the weather is bad like when it rains or snows, close out the horses from all pastures and keep them on a loafing lot until the soil has time to firm up and dry.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

With some simple changes and planning, you can get started right away.

1. Loafing Lot

A designated dry lot, 600 square feet per horse, with shelter, water, and hay. Use it:

- During wet weather or drought
- When all pastures are recovering
- To prevent overgrazing and soil damage

2. Subdivided Paddocks

- Use safe, portable fencing like electric tape and step-in posts.
- Start with 3–4 paddocks and expand over time.
- Base the size and rotation schedule on herd behavior, pasture size, and forage growth.

3. Reliable Water Access

- Horses need clean, fresh water available at all times from the loafing lot.
- You can use portable troughs or plumb water lines between fields.

4. Pasture Maintenance

- Test your soil for pH and nutrients every three years.
- Fertilize and lime according to soil test results.
- Drag pastures after grazing to break up manure and spread nutrients.
- Mow pastures to 4–5 inches once horses have been moved and prior to grazing to keep weeds down and encourage uniform grazing when horses return.
- Overseed bare spots in the fall or early spring.

5. Rest Time = Regrowth Time

- Horses should not return to a paddock until the grass is at least 6 inches tall.

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- If the next paddock isn't ready, use the loafing lot to temporarily house them until one of the pastures is ready.

REAL-LIFE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

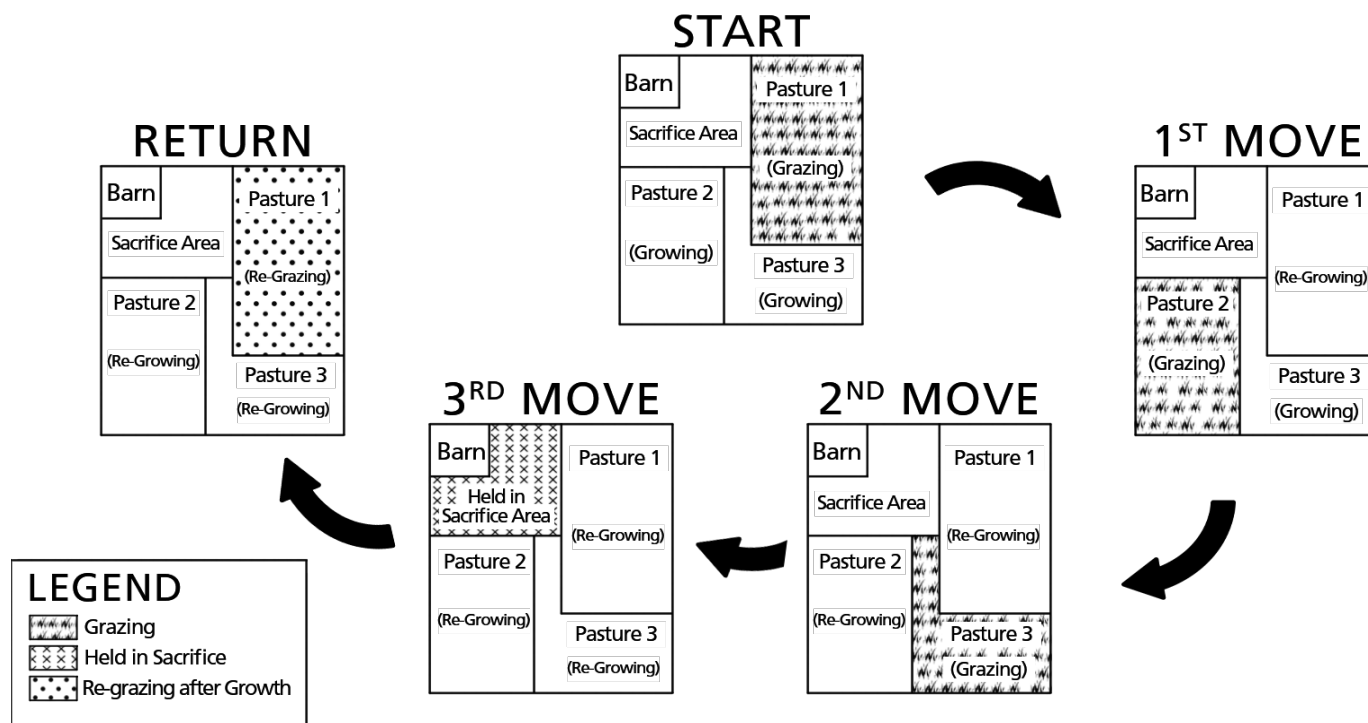
- Don't overcrowd: A quiet herd of geldings may tolerate smaller paddocks, but younger or more active horses may need more space.
- Start small: Try dividing one pasture and rotate a couple of times before committing to a full system.
- Watch the weather: Avoid grazing during soggy conditions to prevent compaction and horses tearing out pasture plants.

- Be flexible: Each year is different—adjust your rotation plan based on rainfall, temperature, and grass growth.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Rotational grazing doesn't have to be complicated, expensive, or overwhelming. With just a few adjustments, you'll see lusher pastures, happier horses, and fewer feed bills. You'll also be doing your part to protect local waterways and preserve your land for future generations.

Healthier pastures truly mean healthier horses and a healthier planet.



For more information on horse manure management and other soil conservation and water quality practices, contact your local Soil Conservation District or visit mda.maryland.gov/HOW.

The Horse Outreach Workgroup (HOW) provides information to horse owners on pasture and manure management. HOW consists of representatives from local Soil Conservation Districts, the Maryland Department of Agriculture, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, University of Maryland Extension, Maryland Horse Council, and the Maryland Horse Industry Board.

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