

# Paddocks for ponies and biodiversity



A well-managed Wild Meadow, where fine-leaved wild grasses and wild flowers are allowed to flourish, provides a healthy environment for ponies and horses. The diversity of herbs, many being deep-rooted, provide a high-fibre low-protein diet that is well-suited to equines. Some herbs, such as Ribwort Plantain and Selfheal, have medicinal properties, that can help to protect grazing animals from diseases and parasites.

Wild Meadows are fields full of wild flowers, grasses, rushes and sedges; they provide a habitat for butterflies, bumblebees as well as other species including birds, bugs, frogs, toads, grass snakes, hedgehogs, other small mammals and fungi. Once a common sight, they are now one of Britain's most threatened habitats. Changes in farming practices have affected the way that meadows are managed; many have been ploughed, intensively grazed, reseeded with rye-grass, fertilized or sprayed with weedkillers. Wild Meadows are also threatened by road schemes and urban development.

**It is vital that the surviving Wild Meadows, many which are grazed by horses and ponies, are carefully managed. Good paddock management will not only benefit wild flowers and other wildlife, but will prevent pasture damage, reduce weed infestation and benefit the health and wellbeing of grazing animals.**

# Management guidelines for wild meadows

## Introduction

Equines (ponies, horses, mules and donkeys) require a high fibre and low protein diet, in contrast to modern breeds of dairy and beef cattle that are bred to produce high yields of milk or meat. This is an important difference when considering the feed requirements of horses and ponies.

There are many advantages to grazing equines on Wild Meadows. For instance, the herbaceous plants (wild flowers) that grow in Wild Meadows retain a high level of digestibility for longer in the season than do grasses, while some of the herbs have medicinal properties that will benefit equine health. Many of the perennial grassland herbs, such as Bird's-foot Trefoil and Common Knapweed, have extensive roots, making them drought-tolerant and able to tap into minerals deep in the soil.

Grasslands containing a good diversity of wild flowers are also higher in fibre and lower in sugar, protein and calories than paddocks that have been resown with conventional forage seed mixes containing predominantly Perennial Rye-grass and White Clover. Such resown pastures are particularly high in protein in spring and autumn – a factor which can cause metabolic disorders in equines, and may adversely affect bone development in young stock.

Wild meadows more closely resemble the original grasslands that equines, especially native breeds, are adapted to, so it isn't surprising that the risk of obesity and laminitis is likely to be lower in these near-wild grasslands.

## Manage grazing

Avoid keeping too many animals on a small acreage, or leaving them in one place for too long. Depending on soil type and other site-specific conditions, ideal stocking numbers could vary from between one to three acres per horse.

Aim to keep the vegetation (the mixture of grasses, herbs and flowers that make up a grassland) a minimum of 5cm (two to three inches) in height while animals are grazing. This length of growth will benefit the health of the grassland and the grazing animals. It will also help prevent animal boredom and protect the grassland from hoof damage (poaching).

Ideally, rotate the areas that are grazed, by dividing the field with sensitive fencing or having other fields that can be grazed. If possible, occasionally alternate grazing with other livestock such as sheep or cattle; this will help reduce long grasses in latrine areas, aid parasite control, and prevent the meadow becoming 'horse-sick'.

Keep management routines flexible so that they can be altered to cope with different seasonal conditions.

## Prevent pasture enrichment

Do not use artificial fertilizers or chicken manure, which will cause wild flowers to disappear. If needed, well-rotted (for at least a year) farmyard manure (FYM) can be applied at 10 tonne/ha in alternate years. If used, FYM should be from a reputable source and free from contamination by pesticides, as these could harm wild plants growing in the meadow.

The average horse produces nine tonnes of manure a year. Favoured dunging areas will rapidly become rich in nutrients that will encourage coarse grasses and weeds, such as nettle and thistle. Pick up dung daily, or twice weekly, to avoid areas becoming enriched and to aid parasite control. Gardeners will appreciate horse dung and may collect it.



## Spring

Grazing can be introduced once the field is sufficiently dry and the vegetation has grown to at least 10cm (4 inches) tall over most of the field. However, for fields containing a good diversity of spring flowers, such as Cowslip, Early-purple or Green-winged Orchids, it will be advantageous to delay introducing grazing until later in the spring or summer.

## Summer

For fields that are not used for hay, if possible, leave some areas of the meadow ungrazed for six to eight weeks between May and September. This will enable plants to flower, and some will also be able to set seed. A flower-rich grassland will also be of great benefit to bees, butterflies and other insects.

If the field is used for a hay crop, 'close up' for eight weeks, cutting the herb-rich hay from mid-July onwards.

## Autumn

Remove grazing animals once there is no more standing vegetation for them to eat and before there is a risk of pasture damage.

## Winter

Wild meadows, and paddocks in general, are at high risk of damage if animals are kept on them when there is no standing or growing vegetation or once the ground is wet, especially during winter. It may be necessary to source additional turn-out areas. Winter grazing should always be avoided in fields supporting Marsh Fritillary butterflies as larval webs will be destroyed by trampling. Pastures on well-drained ground, where a good amount of standing grass and flower stems remain, may be able to support light winter grazing.

If possible, confine supplementary feeding to yards or stable areas. Badly sited feed racks or hay spread on fields where no grass is growing will result in poaching and the creation of bare ground, especially in areas where animals congregate. Severe poaching can cause lasting damage, by destroying the perennial vegetation, exposing the soil and causing soil compaction. This will also encourage weeds such as thistles, docks, ragwort and Creeping Buttercup. Poaching can also lead to conditions such as mud fever.



by Berkshire

**Turning out in winter, when there is no standing vegetation to eat and when the ground is wet, is a principal cause of pasture damage. It can result in long term adverse impacts on the pasture, by destroying the vegetation and causing soil compaction.**



by Berkshire

**Electric tape can be useful to manage grazing and prevent pasture damage.**



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## Weed control

Ragwort is poisonous to horses and ponies. It should be pulled and removed, or leaf rosettes spot-sprayed in spring, ensuring that manufacturers instructions about the removal of animals during spot treatment are followed. Docks and thistles (Creeping, Spear) should be controlled by cutting just as they come into flower, or their leaf rosettes spot-sprayed when young using an appropriate herbicide applied using a hand-held sprayer or weed wiper. Monitor soft rush growth, cutting in August if the rush is encroaching. Many 'specific' herbicides will often kill non-target wild flowers and should never be applied using a spray boom.

Refer to [www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/topics/ragwort.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/topics/ragwort.htm) for the Code of Practice on how to prevent the spread of Ragwort and guidance on disposal options for Common Ragwort.

## Increasing the wild-plant diversity of your meadow

For paddocks that do not currently support many wild plants, it may be possible to introduce some wild grasses and flowers, and by this means improve the wildlife value and fibre content of the grassland. Information on how to achieve this, by introducing seed, can be obtained from other advisory notes published by *Flora locale*, that are accessible via the Wild Meadows website.

## Further information

If your animals graze a Wild Meadow, and you would like advice on how best to manage it for the benefit of its wild flowers and other wildlife, please consult the information, or contact one of the organisations, listed below.

- ✿ Grazing Advice Partnership (GAP): [www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk](http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk).  
GAP in Wales: Pori Natur a Threftdaeth (PONT).  
Email: [pontcymru@btconnect.com](mailto:pontcymru@btconnect.com), tel: 01550 740 333.
- ✿ *Flora locale* Advisory Notes:  
*Grazing for wild plants and biodiversity.*  
*Restoring wildflower grasslands in Wales.*  
*Discover wild plants.*
- ✿ *Wild about meadows. A manifesto for the wild meadows of Wales.* 2008. *Flora locale* and the Grasslands Trust.
- ✿ Wild Meadows website, [www.wildmeadows.org.uk](http://www.wildmeadows.org.uk) for links to all the above and many other resources.
- ✿ The Local Wildlife Trust for your area: [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org).
- ✿ *Managing grass for horses. The responsible owner's guide.* Elizabeth O'Beirne-Ranelagh. Pub. J.A. Allen. £25 – order via [www.buy.at/wildflowers](http://www.buy.at/wildflowers).
- ✿ British Horse Society: [www.bhs.org.uk](http://www.bhs.org.uk). For information on horse health and grazing.

## Know your plants

Managing your grassland will be more interesting and enjoyable if you can identify the plants that grow there. Understanding the vegetation will also help you get the best out of your paddock, for the benefit of your ponies and the local wildlife it may support. *Flora locale's* Advisory Note, *Discover wild plants*, will introduce you to the basic principles of finding out about wild plants in your meadow.



Common Knapweed



Selfheal



Ribwort Plantain



## *Flora locale's* Wild Meadows Initiative

This aims to promote the restoration, good management and appreciation of wildflower grasslands. The Wild Meadows Initiative for Wales is funded by The Countryside Council for Wales and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

[www.wildmeadows.org.uk](http://www.wildmeadows.org.uk)



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*Flora locale* seeks to restore wild plants and wild-plant communities to lands and landscapes across the UK, and by this means raise the biodiversity, environmental quality and enjoyment of town and countryside.

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