



Small Acreage Horse Pastures in the Arizona Central Highlands

Most small land tracts (less than 10 acres) do not have the carrying capacity to support even one horse on forage alone. Homeowners wishing to provide a grazing pasture should expect to keep horses in a corral or a dry lot and turn them out for only short periods per day. Continuous grazing or turnout will damage and trample the grass until it dies out and only weeds, unpalatable plants and/or bare ground remain.

Establishing and maintaining a grazing pasture requires several considerations.

Adequate Irrigation is mandatory and should be in place prior to any planting efforts.

Water sources include:

- a very strong water source (most domestic wells may be inadequate) and proper size pump (and ability to pay for the electricity to run the pump)
- water company or city water (can be expensive)
- overhead sprinklers – most common, unless ditch or flood irrigation is available such as with some properties near Verde River with water rights

Ground Preparation

If beginning with bare soil -

- Start small, about ½ acre at a time.
- Expect intensive weed management effort. If not managed daily, pasture grass will be overrun with weeds and will fail to establish.
- Add a good layer of compost / organic matter and work it in.

If beginning with existing “worn out” pasture or property with native grasses -

- Consider revitalizing, if possible, to save the topsoil and any viable grass root systems rather than plowing to bare soil.
- If available, retain native perennial grasses (grama grasses are prevalent in our area and have deep, extensive roots that are excellent for erosion control and holding moisture).
- Use a no-till drill / pasture renovator-type tool to augment existing grass.

Grass Species Selection

- Plant warm and cool season varieties for some year-round or close to year-round grass.
- Some examples of common grasses for our area:
 - Warm season - blue grama, Bermuda
 - Cool season - orchard grass
 - Pasture mixes are also available.
 - Note: Bermuda grass can be invasive.
- The Native and Naturalized Plants of Yavapai County database is a good source for identification of existing grasses <https://cales.arizona.edu/yavapaiplants/>
- Several pasture grass seed sources are available on the internet.

Planting

When to plant or broadcast the seed depends on the type of grass.

- Seed warm season grasses in late spring when soil temperatures are 65 to 70 degrees.
- Seed cool season grasses in mid-August to mid-October, an ideal time for root development.
- Cool season grasses can be seeded in March or April but there will be less time for root development before the hot weather.
- After planting, water daily for germination; it may require multiple waterings per day (germination time is species specific). Regular watering also avoids blowing dirt/dust (be considerate of neighbors).

Pasture Maintenance

There is insufficient natural rainfall to maintain decent pasture grass of any kind. Supplemental irrigation will be needed.

- Maintain a regular watering schedule; irrigate at least once a week.
- Apply 1/2 inch of water per week (use a container to catch/measure).
- Continue to monitor; pull weeds and unwanted vegetation.
- When grass has been grazed down to about 50%, remove animals and keep them off for 45 days.

Additional Resource: Irrigated Pastures in Arizona,
<https://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az2020-2023.pdf>

October 26, 2025

<https://extension.arizona.edu/local-offices/yavapai-county/yavapai-county-natural-resources/resource-management>

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