Ready to Replant You

Jan Evans

If your pasture needs renovation for any reason, be sure to consider native grasses in your plans. Native grasses evolved in your area, but have probably been replaced by introduced species.

Benefits of Native Grass Species

Native insects evolved to eat certain plants. When those plants are replaced by introduced species, the insects cannot live and reproduce which can create a scarcity for the birds that eat them. When birds quit visiting your property, bothersome insects thrive -- further unbalancing the native ecosystems.

The developed parts of North America have been the most changed. Many places have few native plants and grasses as they have been replaced by introduced species that have been chosen to produce more top growth. The majority of pasture grasses are introduced or exotic species that have been further bred to put weight on cattle. Since horses have longer lifespans than cattle and are not raised for meat, it is obvious that grasses designed for cattle are not the best choices for horses.

Native grass species have deeper root systems and generally produce less above ground growth. This growth pattern creates less litter and fixes nitrogen in the soil while minimizing carbon release into the atmosphere. Soil has been described as a 'carbon sink' which, when used as nature intended, can eliminate the overabundance of C02 in the Earth's atmosphere.

Most native grasses do not require fertilizers or do well with light top dressings of organic matter such as compost. It is recommended to never fertilize buffalograss, which is a drought tolerant, warm season grass suitable for both pastures and lawns.

With less dependence on fertilizers, pesticides, and mowing you can cut your costs and time spent keeping your horses and pastures healthy.

Where Can You Successfully Plant Native Grasses?

Some areas have been changed because irrigation water is now available in semi-arid lands. When you grow native grasses in these areas, you should consider the additional water. Most grasses that developed to withstand drought do very well with irrigation.

Native prairie grasses succeed with rotational grazing because they developed when bison herds ate an area down then moved on. The hooves left depressions that gathered water, and the manure fertilized the prairies. Fire cleared debris and left a fertilized field for the grass to grow anew.

How Can You Replace Non-Native Grasses?

Since most pastures are planted in shallow rooted turf grasses, it's a matter of removing the turf and replanting. Choosing the right grasses for your area can be the most difficult part of the job. Companies selling 'native' grass mixes often provide

r Pasture? Go Native!

Photo by Karen Tappenden

some native grass seed with 20 percent introduced species such as perennial ryegrass. Be aware of which grasses are actual native species, so you can successfully reintroduce native plants.

Your state's Fish and Wildlife Department is the best first stop for finding grass species native to your area. This agency will have a list of native grasses, plants, shrubs and trees for your state. Although your state's university local cooperative extension office can be a great resource, be sure to let them know that you want to reclaim your pastures with only native species and whether you choose to do so organically instead of using herbicides to remove the existing grasses.

Standard United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) hardiness zones are helpful, but if your pasture is located in a micro climate: north or south facing hill, unusual soil moisture, warmer or cooler air or soil temperature, stronger than average wind speed or direction, and humidity -- be sure to take these factors into consideration.

What are the Best Species to Plant?

Native grasses are considered warm or cool season plants. Cool season grasses are the first to awaken in late winter and early spring. They should be planted in the fall or early spring. Warm season grasses wake up when the soil temperatures reach 60 degrees. For best results, plant when the soil temperature is at least 65 degrees.

Warm and cool season grasses grow at different temperatures and at different rates, so it is best to plant a variety of seed. This strategy ensures that your pasture will stay productive throughout the growing season.

Another benefit of variety is avoiding the monoculture syndrome that plagues our developed landscapes. Nature provides symbiotic relationships among plants, insects, and animals to create a healthy environment. When you plant varieties of grass species that evolved together, you create a diverse biome that supports native species.

The sidebar (see page 16) lists available grass species that are suitable for forage. Check with your state's Fish and Wildlife Department or extension office to see if there are other or more suitable native grasses for your area.

Soil type is an important factor in choosing appropriate native grass seed. Plants that evolved on clay type soils will probably not survive in sandy soils that drain quickly. The basic soil types are clay, sand, acid, and salt. Be sure to choose grasses that can tolerate your soil type.

When you choose to return your pasture to its native state, you will be making a positive contribution for your horses and your planet. ✦

Jan Evans is a Reiki and Certified Equine/Small Animal Acupressure Practitioner. Her horse's Insulin Resistance forced her to learn alternative therapies for treating her mare's frequent bouts of laminitis. She offers acupressure and Reiki to animals in Southern Colorado www.COAnimalAcupressure.com. Jan is also a freelance sales and marketing writer specializing in Natural/Alternative Health Markets www.HolisticHealthWriter.com.

Native Grasses Suitable for Forage

Native Cool Season Grasses

Canby Bluegrass
Sandburg Bluegrass
Mountain Brome
Reed Canarygrass
Alpine Fescue
Arizona Fescue
Idaho Fescue
Rocky Mountain Fescue
Rough Fescue
Sheep Fescue
Tufted Hairgrass
Prairie Junegrass
Green Needlegrass
Needle and Thread Needlegrass
Indian Ricegrass
Alkalai Sacaton
Alpine Timothy
Beardless Wheatgrass
Bluebunch Wheatgrass
Slender Wheatgrass
Thickspike Wheatgrass
Western Wheatgrass
Basin Wildrye
Beardless Wildrye
Blue Wildrye
Canada Wildrye
Virginia Wildrye

Native Warm Season Grasses

Big Bluestem
Little Bluestem
Sand Bluestem
Plains Bristlegrass
Buffalograss
Sand Dropseed
James' Galleta
Black Grama
Blue Grama
Sideoats Grama
Yellow Indiangrass
Sand Lovegrass
Spike Muhy
Prairie Sandreed
Green Sprangletop
Switchgrass

Source: https://pawneebuttesseed.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2016-guide-to-grasses.pdf

Some Sources of Native Grass Seed

- Drop Seed Native Plant Nursery (ships to KY, OH, TN, IN, IL, MO, VA, WV and PA) https://www.dropseednursery.com/
- Roundstone Native Seed (eastern half of United States) https://roundstoneseed.com/
- Native Plant Society Directory https://www.ahsgardening.org/gardening-resources/societies-clubs-organizations/native-plant-societies
- Grow Native Massachusetts (list of retailers, wholesalers) https://www.grownativemass.org/resources/nurseries
- Native Grasses http://www.nativegrasses.com/
- Native American Seed https://www.seedsource.com/Default.asp
- L & H Seeds (Northwest) http://www.lhseeds.com/
- PT Lawn Seed (Pacific Northwest Native Seed) https://ptlawnseed.com/collections/native-seeds
- Stock Seed Farms (Midwest) https://www.stockseed.com/Shop/native-grasses
- Outside Pride https://www.outsidepride.com/seed/native-grass-seed/
- Pawnee Buttes Seed Inc. https://pawneebuttesseed.com/pasture-reclamation/