

Herb Garden for Horses

I am frequently contacted by owners enquiring about the feasibility of growing a mixed pasture of grasses and herbs in their horses' paddocks. It's a very nice idea, as it will increase nutritional variety and it's true that horses have been known to seek out specific medicinal herbs when they need them, but unfortunately it can be quite a tricky feat to accomplish in the Southern African climate that ranges from extremely dry to very humid. Overseas it's quite a different story, as herbs will grow perfectly happily amongst their native grasses. I have heard that in Germany the standard baled hay commercially available is automatically a mixture of volunteer native grasses and field herbs such as Calendula, Dandelion, Fennel, Mint, etc, which is so totally unlike here as monoculture hays are the norm, particularly in the Western Cape where Veldt hay is not available at all.

But getting back to the subject of the herb paddock, a major problem most people find when they try to grow mixed herb/indigenous grass pastures in SA is that our grasses (and the non-indigenous but extremely widespread invasive Kikuyu grass) will grow extremely voraciously when there is sufficient water available (which the herbs will need in order to grow in our country's mostly dry climate), and then the grasses tend to grow right over the top of any other plants and completely crowd them out, so it's very hard to keep the right balance of herb and grass for any period of time. If you are planning to do a smaller area and keep it entirely grass free it would give the herbs a much better growing opportunity, but there are two major drawbacks to this option: firstly, just a couple of horses can do a LOT of damage to a patch of herbs in a small area in a very short amount of time (due to trampling and pulling whole herbs out roots and all) and secondly, I feel that if the horses are left in for too long there could be some risk involved in that some horses may then choose to overfeed on the herbs (possibly due to hunger, or otherwise responding to cravings for green feed if insufficient was previously available). One idea would be to establish a quality grass paddock surrounded with a 1-2m wide grass-free herb bed, either inside the paddock, or what I feel is the most practical solution, is to plant the herbs on the outside of a post and rail fence, so that the horses can still have free access to the herbs, but will not trample them.

In the herb beds I would suggest growing herbs such as Comfrey, Licorice, Dandelion, Chamomile, Golden Rod, Echinacea, Vervain, Red Clover, Parsley, Mint, Marshmallow, Calendula, Fennel and Nettle, all of which are great for maintaining healthy horses and also grow well in our climate. Make sure that you plant the English Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) and NOT the potentially toxic and much hairier Russian Comfrey. The Dandelion must be the medicinal *Taraxacum officinale* variety, not our SA subspecies that is toxic and can cause a stringhalt type lameness if eaten in large quantities. Our local weed variety of nettle (*Urtica urens*) is fully interchangeable with the British type (*Urtica dioica*), and the horses will usually gobble them up if you cut the plants and leave them to wilt in the sun for a couple of hours (in order to neutralise the stinging hairs) before offering to them.

You could also put in a couple plants each of Yarrow, Thyme, Rosemary, Lavender, Wormwood and Sage. These herbs are quite powerful, containing volatile oils like thujone and thymol, which have anti-inflammatory, antibiotic and antiparasitic properties, but which horses would only very rarely choose to eat limited quantities of as

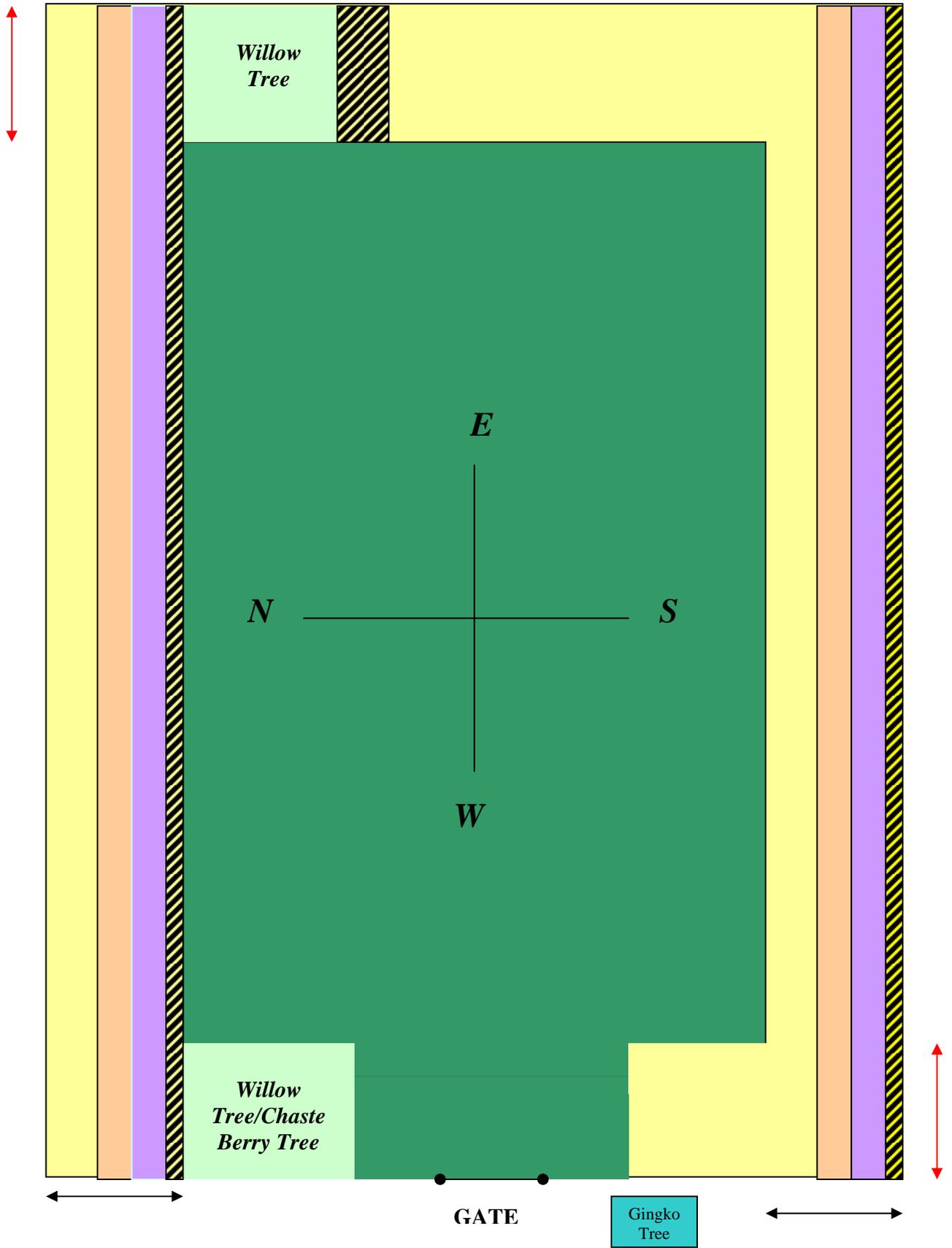
and when necessary. Too much of these herbs for too long can cause toxicity issues, but it's highly unlikely that horses would ever willingly over-eat on any of them.

Two herbs that are incredibly safe and extremely healthy for horses to nibble on and can be grown around the border of paddocks as a hedge for natural shelter, are Hawthorn (botanical name *Crataegus oxycantha*) and the Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*), which grows particularly successfully in a clay or partial-clay soil. Horses particularly like eating the Rose's red fruits, called hips.

It may take quite some effort to establish and maintain a herb garden for your horses, but should be very well worthwhile in the end! Once or twice a year, when it comes time to neaten up the garden with a bit of trimming, spread the cut herbs thinly over the grass in the paddock so that they dry out in the sun, as horses often prefer the taste of dried herbs to fresh.

Herb Paddock for Horses

SEE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR DIAGRAM



Herb Paddock for Horses

Key for Diagram:



Hedge plants

Plant the hedge alternating between The Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus oxycanthus*). Other *Crataegus* species also have the same medicinal properties and are safe, but some are more palatable than others.



Full sun plants (*grouping*)

- Chamomile - *Matricaria recutita* (7-11, or sow freely)
- Lavendar – *Lavendula angustifolia* (3)
- Parsley - *Petroselinum crispum* (5-9, or sow freely)
- Rosemary – *Rosmarinus officinalis* (3)
- Wormwood – *Artemisia absinthum* (3)
- Thyme – *Thymus vulgare* (3)
- Valerian – *Valeriana officinalis* (3-5)
- Echinacea – *Echinace purpurea*, *E. pallida*, *E. angustifolia* (5-7, or sow freely)
- Fenugreek – *Trigonella foenum-graecum* (sow freely)
- Alfalfa – *Medicago sativum* (sow freely)
- Oats – *Avena sativa* (sow freely)
- Calendula – *Calendula officinalis* (9-11, or sow freely)
- Dandelion – *Taraxacum officinale* (sow freely)
- Marshmallow – *Althea officinalis* (3-5)
- Yarrow – *Achillea millefolium* (3-5)
- Fennel – *Foeniculum vulgare* (5-7)
- Golden Rod – *Solidago canadensis*, *S. occidentalis*, *S. gigantean* (3-5)
- Hops – *Humulus lupulus* (3-on trellis support)
- Eyebright – *Euphrasia officinalis* (*this is a semi-parasitic plant, so sow seeds around a suitable host plant*)
- Plantain – *Plantago major* (5-7, or sow freely)
- Raspberry – *Rubus idaeus* (3)
- Red clover – *Trifolium pratense* (sow freely)
- Vervain – *Verbena officinalis* (5-7)



Semi-shade plants

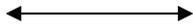
- Chamomile - *Matricaria recutita* (7-11, or sow freely)
- Mint – *Mentha piperita* (*only 1 – it will spread widely!*)
- Fennel – *Foeniculum vulgare* (5-7, or sow freely)
- Gotu kola – *Centenella asiatica* (5-7, or sow freely)
- Valerian – *Valeriana officinalis* (3-5)
- Marshmallow – *Althea officinalis* (3-5)
- Comfrey – *Symphytum officinale* (5-7)

 Shade plants

Comfrey – *Symphytum officinale* (5-7)
Lemon Balm – *Melissa officinalis* (5-7)
Mint – *Mentha piperita* (only 1 – it will spread widely!)

 Paddock Grass

Horses really enjoy our healthy and indigenous Cynodon and Buffalo grasses, and they are very hardwearing. Kentucky Fescue is a good grass to overseed with in late summer/autumn as it continues to grow through winter. It's also healthy for horses, but it is a clumping grass, so if your grass paddocks are also doubled up as schooling arenas it is not recommended.

 5m wide

 4m wide

The Purpose for this Garden Layout – to have interlinking paddocks with the same arrangement, hence the hedge planted in the middle. If only one herb paddock was needed, then the hedge can be planted right against the outside boundary (then the shorter type herbs planted on the outside would not be required), and then the hedge borders would only need to be 4m wide.

Tips for planting:

- 1) If you want to create a more natural look, plant groups of the same plant in odd numbers
- 2) Planting groups of the same plant will also help to prevent any one plant from being overeaten. The only exception to this would be mint, which is extremely spreading and may need to be brought back in check from time to time. The more palatable the herb, the bigger grouping should be planted i.e. 9 vs 3. Herbs that I would only plant a maximum of 1 group of 3 include rosemary, lavender and wormwood. Depending on the size of the paddock, I would probably choose to plant 2 groups of 3 aloe
- 3) Make sure the Willow and Ginkgo trees are planted far enough away from the fence so that the horses cannot strip bark the trunk, they should only be able to reach the trailing branches once the trees have become well established. These trees are highly palatable for horses! Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) is an extremely slow grower, and loves full-sun. However, both it and the Willow (*Salix babylonica*) are non-indigenous, and although these trees are non-invasive you

may need to obtain a permit in order to plant these trees. Another tree to consider growing is the Chaste Berry tree (*Vitex agnus castus*)

- 4) Hops will need a trellis for support
- 5) The paddock fence should be a single rail fence up to approx 4'0 high – at least for horses and large ponies this will be fine
- 6) Unless they are toxic or overwhelming the planted herbs, leave volunteer weeds to grow – they often also make good alternative grazing
- 7) Make sure the herbs are well rooted before allowing the horses access to them.
- 8) Plant the lowest growing herbs closest to the rail