

# The Grass Man



BY LESLIE DECKARD  
PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Chances are Roger Allman's name will never be directly linked to a grade I winner or a sale topper, but it's odds-on his work has helped shape the growth and development of many of the world's most celebrated runners and auction stars. As a highly respected horse pasture agronomist and co-owner of The Farm Clinic with Richard Shoemaker, Allman oversees the pasture management of more than 500 farms in 21 states and eight foreign countries.

Pasture management is more than creating the lush, green paddocks that look so impressive sprouting from inside the plank fences lining Thoroughbred farms from Versailles, Ky., to County Kildare, Ireland. To Allman, pasture management is about developing a healthy blend of grasses that foster the proper development when digested by horses.

"I'm not just looking at the health of the plant, because really that's not the end crop. The end crop is the health of the horse," Allman said. "So you start with the soil and work with the plants that are growing there. You want plants that the horses will eat, plants that can withstand hoof damage, plants that are going to be productive enough to carry the numbers of horses. Then you have to look at what's inside the plant from the dietary standpoint, to ensure the horse is consuming the right balance of nutrients."

"His work is vital to a farm manager," said Tom Goncharoff, manager of Crystal Springs Farm near Paris, Ky. "The most important resource Central Kentucky has to offer is its grass. Roger comes in and tells me what we need to do and we do it. Having him is just one less thing I have to worry about."

Crystal Springs, owned by R.D. Hubbard, is relocating to New Mexico where Allman has been working with Goncharoff on a fertilizing and seeding program for the new property. "The farm in New Mexico is an old alfalfa farm, so we had Roger come in and take a look at the place, and he's come up with some very good recommendations," Goncharoff said.

Allman learned his craft as a teenager growing up in West Lafayette, Ind., while working with his father at The Farm Clinic during summer vacations from school. "I planned to only do it for a few months, but the thought of getting paid to walk around some of the world's most beautiful horse farms really appealed to me," said Allman, who has worked for The Farm Clinic for 26 years.

The Farm Clinic was founded in the mid-1930s by Dr. C.M. Long, an extension professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette. Long believed universities were not doing enough to introduce technology and science to corn and soybean farmers in the Midwest. The company is now split into two divisions, row crops, such as corn and soybeans, based in West Lafayette, and horse pasture management, based near Lexington.

Allman, a Purdue graduate, oversees the Lexington operation with his assistant, Elise Todd. "I credit Roger with teaching me everything I know about grass," said Todd, who has worked with Allman for five years.







Allman's late father, Marshall Allman, worked in the company's corn and soybean division after completing a tour of duty during World War II. In late 1947, the elder Allman traveled to Tennessee to analyze a pasture at a Tennessee Walking Horse farm. Two years later he added several Central Kentucky Thoroughbred and Standardbred farms—Castleton, Leatherwood, and Pin Oak—as clients.

"We were one of the pioneers in soil analysis," Roger Allman said. "Going on from that, we were the first to do it on horse farms."

Allman credits his father with helping him learn and appreciate the business. "The two of us dove-tailed very well," Allman said. "We had his experience and I was fresh out of college and thought I knew everything. It was amazing to see something new and hear my father say, 'No, this isn't new, we had the same thing happen at such and such farm back in the 1950s.' It was a good way for me to learn that there's really nothing new under the sun, and a lot of these problems and a lot of these things that we think are unique and modern have occurred before, and there's actually a lot of continuity out there."

"I certainly think having Roger around is another piece of the puzzle in how to raise a good racehorse," said George Isaacs, farm manager at Arthur I. Appleton's Bridlewood Farm near Ocala, Fla. "He does such an extensive and thorough soil analysis that gives you the critical information on the depleted minerals and how best to replenish them."

Isaacs, who has used Allman for at least 10 years at Bridlewood, said the two met when Allman was working alongside his father. "The two men are gentlemen and scholars," Isaacs said. "Roger learned from the master. His father was a great guy, just like Roger."

Allman has become a much sought-after pasture agronomist, servicing by some estimations about 90% of the world's major Thoroughbred farms. His name came to the forefront during the mare reproductive loss syndrome (MRLS) crisis that struck Central Kentucky in 2001 when he was a featured speaker on several informational forums.

"MRLS made a lot of people very shy about doing things to their pastures," he said. "I'm not used to telling my clients that I don't know what the problem is, but that was the only honest answer I could give them at that time. Many times my practical suggestion was to keep doing what you've been doing for the past 20 years because in the long term you know it's going to work."

Last year he spent more than 150 days outside Central Kentucky visiting farms and walking pastures. (Allman said he walks an average of 15 miles of pasture per day.) Of those 150 days, he spent nearly two-thirds in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.

"It's fascinating to me and I learn a lot from the fact that in all these different places, everybody is trying to do the same thing...raise a good racehorse," said Allman.



**Roger Allman and his assistant, Elise Todd, take soil samples at Overbrook Farm near Lexington**



Allman said while the entire world is racing to raise the best foals, Central Kentucky, Ocala, Fla., and Northern Germany have a leg up in the department of natural resources due to the high phosphorous levels found in their soil.

"We (Central Kentucky) are correctly known for our limestone and the first element that pops into people's heads when they think of limestone is calcium," he said. "But what makes our Central Kentucky limestone unique is that it's very high in phosphorus. These old-timers didn't know anything about soil testing or the elements, but when they came here, because of the phosphorus in our soil, they saw better bone, bigger bone, and more soundness in their young stock, so they continued to raise horses here."

He added while the high phosphorous levels can be a blessing, they can also be a curse. "Because we have so much phosphorus, we have to work very hard to keep our lime and calcium levels up to balance all of what is naturally there."

Both inside and outside Central Kentucky, Allman's role in raising a good racehorse comes into play the moment he goes to work for a new client. "Whenever I go to a new farm, one of the first things I do is identify its strengths and weaknesses," he said. "Walking the fields and looking between my feet is where I really start to learn."

After walking the pasture, Allman conducts a series of soil sample tests to measure the amount of lime, phosphorus, and potassium naturally available in the soil. He plots the location of each sample on a map that is passed along to the farm manager.

"To put it in perspective, for example, on a 41.6-acre field we are going to take 24 different soil samples, about one every two acres," Allman said. "My belief is that the value of the crop, the Thoroughbred, is high enough that if I am going to make a recommendation on how best to treat the field, I want to know how this part tests and how that part tests. I want to look at all the components that are in the field and look at the field in complete detail."

After the soil sample tests are completed, Allman provides a color-coded map listing

## Allman Facts

**Age:** 46

**Family:** son, Alex, 16, and daughter, Elizabeth, 19

**Resides:** Lexington

**Education:** Purdue University

**Office:** The Farm Clinic is based in West Lafayette, Ind., with Allman's office located near Lexington

**Travel:** employed by more than 500 farms in 21 states and eight foreign countries

**Quote:** "One of the lines I like to use after we treat a pasture is: 'There's not a mare in the world I wouldn't feel comfortable turning out there.' If I feel that about a pasture, then it doesn't get any better."

the percentage of each element available in the area that was tested.

“A lot of times, when you get information to a farm manager, if he or she can’t interpret it or if they find it difficult to understand, the recommendations don’t get acted upon,” Allman said. “The clients need to have confidence in me and confidence in what I’m doing. The better I can explain why I want these things done and why it will give them a better racehorse, then they are much more likely to get it done once they have that confidence.”

“He’s like an ant out there (in the pastures)... He’s everywhere,” said Danny Schifflett, farm manager of William S. Farish’s Lane’s End Texas near Hempstead. “His work is very important to getting the pH levels up in the soil, which is important to getting bone and growth development down the line. I think his work plays an important role for soundness.”

Allman also completes composite samples, where he tests for such things as organic matter, magnesium and calcium, sulphur, zinc, and manganese.

“Those minor nutrients that nutritionists often link to bone problems and developmental syndromes in young horses are very important,” he said. “The big one that nutritionists often are looking at is copper and zinc. Those are two of the bigger nutrients on the micro level. And with these I tend not to apply to the land, but if I can tell the clients that there’s not much out there in the soil, then they can supplement it in the feed or through supplements to try to balance those imbalances.”

In addition to taking soil and composite samples, Allman also evaluates the botanical composition of pastures to look at what the horses are eating, identifies the major species of grass and weeds in the field, and examines the sod density.

“What this does is help farm managers identify, especially here in Central Kentucky, the fields where you wouldn’t want your pregnant broodmares, such as fields that have taller fescue. Tall fescue is linked to a lot of reproductive problems,” Allman said. “Or we can also help identify things such as heavy clover fields that may not be the best field to put your young horses in because clover is very high in crude protein and it’s very rich. The horses really love it. It’s like the candy bar of forage.”

Allman is quick to point out that there is no such thing as the perfect pasture, but his job is to make the pasture as perfect as possible based on its own strengths and weaknesses. “While it has its faults, Kentucky bluegrass is one of the very best grasses to get established,” he said. “I’m a big fan of grass called orchard grass and some perennial rye grass, which is a very common pasture base in Northern Europe. Like all species of grass, they have their pluses

### Allman's Tips for a Healthy Pasture

- 1 Evaluate the pastures. You can only properly evaluate by looking between your feet.
- 2 Apply lime to achieve and maintain a pH of 6.6 to 6.8 and to supply calcium to balance phosphorus. Do not over (or under) lime.
- 3 Apply autumn fertilizers to encourage root growth, thickening, and to aid recovery from the summer. When phosphorus and potassium are needed this also improves the nutritional quality of the forages.
- 4 Seed to maintain a thick cushion of sod and a high percentage of palatable species.
- 5 Control weeds. Topping to prevent new weed seed from being deposited and when necessary, chemical control to reduce existing plants.

and minuses. Everything is based on the pasture’s original strengths and weaknesses.

“One of my favorite lines I like to use is: ‘There’s not a mare in the world I wouldn’t feel comfortable turning out there.’ If I feel that about a pasture, then it doesn’t get any better,” he said.

Allman and Todd visit clients at least once a year and often take soil samples every two years. They are also involved in a number of research projects at various farms that require regular visits.

“I do have several farms I visit quarterly,” Allman said. “I have plant analysis and research projects going on where we’re looking at what’s in the soil, basically looking for what the plant has to draw upon. We also have some fairly regulated herbage analysis where we’re looking at how the nutritional composition within the grass is changing seasonally with management and with species. By tracking these changes in research projects, we’re learning a lot about what the horses are eating out there.”

A major concern in the area of pasture management for Allman is the shrinking availability of farmland, something he said is noticeable from Lexington to Ocala.

“Because of the value of the land and because of the economics of this business, we tend to run more horses on less acreage, and that can certainly lead to problems in the pastures,” he said. “Another issue, and it’s not on the forefront yet, and it’s certainly a potential problem in Central Kentucky, is our very good ‘Class A’ land is not an ever-expanding donut. So as we get pressures from developers and from the city, we lose some land and we lose a resource that can’t be replaced. We can’t just pick up and move 60 miles to the south and hope to raise the type of horse we do here on our very good land.”

Contributing to the growth and development of grade I winners and record-setting sale graduates hasn’t turned Allman into a fanatical racing fan or even given him the itch to develop his own farm, but he does admit to dropping \$2 on his clients’ horses when he goes to the racetrack.

“With pasture analysis, it’s very difficult to evaluate how you’re doing,” he said. “If we were raising corn, we would look at what we spent on raising that crop, and how much we have in the bins, and we can tell how we are doing. It’s a lot tougher with horses. One of the ways I evaluate my work is by watching my clients’ horses on the racetrack and inside the sale ring. If the clients are happy with the results, then I know we are doing things the right way. I take great pride in that.”



For each pasture, Allman provides farm managers with a color-coded map showing mineral percentages in the ground