

Horses on Small Farms

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Introduction

Horses and ponies are a popular choice of animal suitable for small farms, especially in locations where horse activities are prevalent. Horses are commonly used for recreation, showing, breeding, racing, and companionship. The quality of care and the well-being of horses on small farms are dependent on the facilities, nutritional and health programs, and those who manage the horses.

The behavior or social nature of horses should be considered when planning and caring for horses on a small farm. Horses have evolved through the centuries as grazing animals in herds, and thus their behavior often reflects their strong bonds (attachments?) with other horses. Isolating a horse from herd mates or other animals may be very stressful or even progress to causing injuries. Thus, more than one horse is usually kept on a premise. Mares (mature female horses) and geldings (castrated mature male horses) are often kept together in an outdoor enclosure; whereas, stallions usually require individual housing along with experienced handlers. Young horses or mares with foals are sometimes separated from older, more aggressive horses when kept in pasture environments.

When selecting an appropriate horse, the less knowledgeable purchaser may benefit from getting help and expertise from a local established horseperson or trainer. Often veterinarians can recommend an appropriate source for advice. Horses can be purchased through a variety of marketing channels including word of mouth, dealers, trainers, breeding farms, and rescue shelters. The price of a horse varies considerably from 1,500 to over one million dollars, and this is dependent on their breeding, gender, age, health and soundness, winnings, and training. Examples of popular light horse breeds include the Arabians, Thoroughbreds, and Quarter Horses, while popular pony breeds include the Shetland and Welsh. In general, the cost of keeping (feed, bedding, and veterinary and farrier services) a horse on your own property is between 2,000 and 3000 dollars per year.

Facilities

Horses adapt to many different environments, from free roaming on large areas of pasture or ranges to being confined in stalls within a barn. The weather conditions or season also may determine which type of facility is most appropriate. The facilities for housing horses outdoors commonly utilize pastures, paddocks (smaller areas), or corrals (usually no continuous vegetation), while indoor facilities primarily use box stalls for individual horses. Other facilities use a combination and rotate horses between indoor box stalls and outdoor pastures, paddocks, or corrals, usually on a daily basis. Horses kept solely in box stalls require exercise on a regular basis.

The size of the box stall will depend on the size of the horse but generally a 12 × 12-foot stall will accommodate most horses. The ceiling should be high enough not to cause injury to a horse in a normal standing posture, which is usually 8 to 10 feet in

height. Breeding stallions, mares with foals, or pregnant mares near foaling are often provided with larger box stalls, usually twice the size of an average stall.

Stalls should be cleaned to keep horses dry and the air suitably free of dust and odors, particularly ammonia. Hard floors in stalls are covered with bedding materials to increase comfort and absorb wastes. Common bedding materials include straw, sawdust, or wood shavings. An average sized mature (1100-lb) horse produces about 45 lbs of manure daily, plus urine, and other soiled bedding. Each stall is usually cleaned and bedded daily. Manure and soiled bedding (1-2 tons manure and bedding per year) should be disposed of appropriately according to local regulations.

Many horses are successfully kept in outdoor environments such as small corrals or pastures. In very hot, very cold, or wet environments, shelters, shade structures, or wind breaks should be provided. Three-sided or run-in sheds are commonly used structures for horses. Bedding may be required in some climates to keep the horse warm and dry. Mature horses can acclimate to sub-zero air temperatures, but require wind protection; whereas, newborn foals require more protection. In wet, muddy conditions, an area should be provided for animals to lie down on dry surfaces. During any season, manure accumulation in small corrals should be cleaned up as needed to ensure proper sanitation and pest control such as flies.

Properly constructed and maintained fences are a major investment for the small farm with horses. Fences should be constructed to avoid features that are injurious to horses, such as sharp, protruding objects (e.g., nails, wires, bolts, and latches). Narrow corners (e.g., less than a 45° angle) should be avoided because a horse can be trapped by a herd mate and be kicked, bitten, or otherwise injured. Common fencing for horses includes wooden posts and rails, solid boards, wire, metal pipe, plastic, rubber, V-mesh, or chain-linked fencing. Barbed wire should be avoided, especially for small enclosures due to its propensity to cause severe injuries. An electrical fence may be suitable for some horses but require the opportunity to safely acclimate the horses to the electric fence. Many injuries in horses are due to fencing, thus the careful introduction of a new horse to an established herd or novel environment may help minimize the risk of injury. The width of a gate should be at least 4 feet for the safe passage of a horse, but an 8 to 16 foot wide gate may be necessary for farm tractors and other equipment to pass through. Gate latches should be “horse-proof,” so that a curious horse cannot easily open the gate.

Health and Nutrition

Horses confined to box stalls are usually fed a hay-based diet at least twice per day. The fibrous feed reduces the incidence of colic and behavioral problems, such as cribbing, tail chewing, or ingestion of bedding. For horses kept outdoors, quality pasture may provide the necessary nutrients depending on stocking density, nutritional needs of the horses (e.g., maintenance vs. lactation), and the environment. Pasture stocking density varies from 1 to 10 acres per horse depending on season, type, growth pattern of the forage, and management of pastures. Cold and wet climates increase the energy requirement of horses significantly, and thus supplemental feeding (i.e., hay and grain) may be required. Care of the pasture includes regular fertilization, clipping of the excess

growth to encourage palatability and increase nutrient values, and manure removal (or dragging the pasture to break up manure piles) to control flies and internal parasites.

When the sole source of feed is only pasture vegetation or locally grown hay, the trace minerals known to be deficient locally should be included in an available salt block. Water should be available at all times to horses in both indoor and outdoor facilities. Idle horses drink 4 to 8 gallons per day, and lactating or exercising horse may drink double that amount.

Hooves are usually trimmed by a farrier every six to eight weeks, but this may vary depending on hoof growth, environmental conditions, and exercise activity of the horse. Hooves should be cleaned at least once weekly in stalls and whenever necessary in pasture situations to prevent infection and lameness. Horses in pastures or dry corrals will groom themselves by rubbing on stationary objects or rolling. Horses confined to box stalls should be groomed weekly and more often if they are shedding their hair coat.

Consult an equine veterinarian for appropriate deworming and vaccination plans suitable for each horse which may depend on its age, production status (lactation, pregnancy), local diseases, or other variables (e.g., traveling off the premises). All horses should be vaccinated for tetanus. Other common vaccinations include rabies, equine encephalitis, distemper, influenza, West Nile virus, and rhinopneumonitis. Anthelmintic treatment (deworming) for common internal parasites is easily performed using oral paste products that are available over-the-counter or from a veterinarian.

Conclusion

Caring for horses on a small farm can be a recreational, profitable, and/or valuable learning or social experience. Many educational resources are available ranging from equine books and magazines to short courses at Universities. Youth and adult horse enthusiasts may enjoy the 4-H and other equine clubs in the area. Often local veterinarians and farriers will conduct educational seminars. Trainers offer clinics and lessons on riding and showing horses at all levels. Community colleges may also have horse or equine related courses. Feed and equipment stores have demonstrations or informational literature. The continuation of educational opportunities is extensive for horse related topics and can be rewarding in developing a small farm that includes the appropriate management and care of horses.