

A Place Called

HOME



Mark Lewellyn

Millions of horse owners have never experienced the everyday joys and frustrations of caring for their own horses. With urbanization swallowing up acres of farmland, more and more people must rely on others to share in horsekeeping endeavors. Whether by choice or necessity, boarding horses relieves the day-to-day pressures of horse care, but some find the notion of others overseeing their steeds' needs worrisome. One critical aspect of care that should be investigated thoroughly before choosing a boarding facility is the feeding program. An analysis of what, when, and how horses are fed will help soothe concerns and ensure that your horse is experiencing a happy and healthy homelife.

## FORAGE

The most important component of any feeding program is forage, be it pasture or hay. Without question, a survey of the paddocks, pastures, and other turnout areas in which your horse may reside is in order before finalizing a boarding arrangement.

Depending upon their geographical location, these areas may vary greatly in the amount of forage they provide to their occupants, so it's imperative to keep your horse's forage requirements in mind. Is your horse a rotund Quarter Horse gelding that requires little grass or hay to maintain his weight, or is he a high-strung Thoroughbred that must have constant access to high-quality forage?

Some turnout areas are lush and contribute most or all of the energy needed by certain horses. Growing horses and lactating mares, for instance, may thrive in bountiful surroundings. On the other hand, particularly rich pastures might actually supply too many calories to horses with minimal energy requirements, and management techniques (muzzling and limited turnout) must be implemented to keep horses from becoming overweight.

Other pastures and paddocks contain sparse vegetation. These areas may be acceptable, even ideal, for easy keepers, as they would provide only limited calories to horses. The flip side, however, dictates the same pastures might be unsuitable for horses with exceptional energy demands such as young horses, mares in late gestation, or horses in intense exercise.

In fields with limited forage growth, be sure to ask how often horses are given hay. This is important year-round, but especially so in late autumn, winter, and early spring when forage growth may be diminished. Horses should have access to forage continuously. Discuss with the stable owner the type of hay fed to horses in pasture situations. Is the hay thrown flake by flake from square bales or are round bales used? Assuming the hay is palatable, horses consume all-important fiber either way, but square-baled hay might provide more nutrients, thus impacting the amount and type of concentrate fed. Though this may be insignificant if the horse is fed concentrate and higher quality hay at other times of the day, it is an important consideration if it's the horse's sole source of nutrition. Should this be the case, the hay may not furnish sufficient protein, vitamins, and minerals for optimal health, as weathering leaches nutrients from dried forage stored outdoors.

Though it may be tempting to do a drive-by inspection of turnout areas, resist the urge. Ask to walk through the fields to get a close-up look at what's growing within the fences. Is there plenty of succulent grass or are there extensive patches of



weeds? Fields overridden with undesirable vegetation might look green and lush from a distance, but horses derive no nutrition from them whatsoever. Don't worry, you won't need a degree in horticulture or agronomy to distinguish beneficial pasture plants from nonnutritious ones.

Does the pasture look as though it's mowed frequently? Horses derive greatest nutritional benefit from grasses that are six to eight inches tall during peak growing seasons. If grasses are allowed to grow too tall (look for seedheads), the stalks become tough and fibrous, and the plants lose considerable nutrient content.

A few bare areas should be expected in all pastures. Even immaculately managed farms cannot keep horses from congregating in certain places, and constant trampling will invariably leave barren patches. Expect these areas around gates, waterers, feeders, and run-in sheds. Some farm owners choose to lay special footing in these high-traffic areas to keep dust and mud to a minimum.

This preliminary walk-through also provides a perfect opportunity to check the condition of fences, shelters, and other structures to which horses have access. If pastures are

near a road, be sure there's no trash dotting the fenceline. It's not unusual for motorists and pedestrians to toss bottles, aluminum cans, and other waste over a fence, and these can quickly become hazardous to horses. Conscientious stable owners keep litter out of pastures and paddocks, even if trash collection is a near-daily chore.

Be sure to look at the water supply in the field. Do horses drink from an automatic waterer or a trough? Both should be kept clean with regular scrubbing. If there's an overgrowth of algae or a collection of leaves, twigs, or other debris in the waterer, chances are good that the water supply is not being checked with any consistency. Without access to drinkable water, horses are more apt to colic, especially in winter when most of the forage consumed contains little moisture.

Once you've taken a walk through the outdoor environment and have decided it's up to snuff, head indoors. Horses housed part of the day will likely be fed hay in their stalls or runs. Ask to see a bale or two of the hay that's typically fed. Be sure the hay is free of dust and weeds by requesting to break open the bale, and don't be afraid to lean over it and take a whiff. Properly baled hay does not smell musty!

If the opportunity arises, investigate the area where hay is stockpiled. Bales exposed to rain, sleet, or snow may become moldy and unsuitable for consumption by horses. A knowledgeable barn employee will know the difference between palatable and unpalatable hay, but the teenager that works on the weekends may not, and your horse could inadvertently receive a helping of moldy hay.

In addition to the quality of hay fed, ask about the quantity allotted for each horse daily. Well-meaning but ill-informed caretakers sometimes make the mistake of feeding all horses on a farm the same amount of hay, doling out a couple of flakes to each horse at feeding time. The correct amount of hay must be determined for horses on an individual basis.

Feel comfortable in asking the origin of the hay. Was it purchased from a reliable neighbor or at the local hay auction? How often are horses switched from one type of hay to another? Is hay screened often for potential problems? Top-quality alfalfa hay, for instance, is grown throughout the West and shipped eastward. Though infrequent, bales of alfalfa might be infested with blister beetles, insects that are toxic to horses.

If a horse is going to spend more than a couple of hours in his stall, it's essential that the horse be given access to hay at all times. Not only does a heap of hay give the horse something to do, but it also keeps him healthy. Horses with constant access to forage are less likely to develop gastric ulcers, which are known to negatively influence disposition and performance.



*Prior to signing a boarding agreement, the condition of pastures and buildings should be assessed. Run-in sheds provide protection for horses but only if they're maintained properly.*

## GRAIN

More often than not, boarding stables purchase an all-purpose concentrate, usually a textured or sweet feed, that is fed to the majority of horses on the farm. Take stock of that feed and make sure it's in alignment with the nutritional needs of your horse. A 10% feed may not be appropriate for a growing horse, for instance.

The stable owner might be amenable to purchasing the feed most suitable for your horse (a low-glycemic feed for young horses or a senior formulation for aged horses), but this is not usually the case. If a specialized feed cannot be purchased specifically for your horse, ask about the possibility of supplying your own concentrate. Will the stable owner reduce the amount of board if you purchase your own feed? Must you provide your own container in which to store the feed?

Regardless of the type of feed, ensure it is fortified with vitamins and minerals. Some low-cost feeds may not provide sufficient nutrients for certain horses. All feeds formulated by Kentucky Equine Research contain optimal vitamin and mineral nutrition for the horses in which they were designed.

How is the grain stored? For maximal freshness, grain should be kept in containers that are impenetrable by insects and rodents. Galvanized steel garbage cans or secondhand freezers (modified to prevent children from becoming trapped in them) are good choices. Grain that is stored in flimsy or insubstantial containers or left in bags may become contaminated with dead insects and waste material from rodents and other nuisance animals (such as opossums and raccoons). The opossum has been identified as an intermediate host in the life cycle of parasites that cause equine protozoal myeloencephalitis (EPM), a debilitating neuromuscular disease found throughout North America. It's necessary, therefore, that opossums be kept away from feed stores.

## SUPPLEMENTS

Supplements have become dietary staples for some horses. Fortunately, the majority of stable owners are willing to feed supplements to horses. However, a specific protocol may be in place to handle supplement feeding, a task that can be quite time-consuming for farm employees.


One central Kentucky operation requires its boarders to mix all dry supplements together and place them in small plastic containers, each marked with a specific day of the week. The proper day's concoction is mixed into the grain

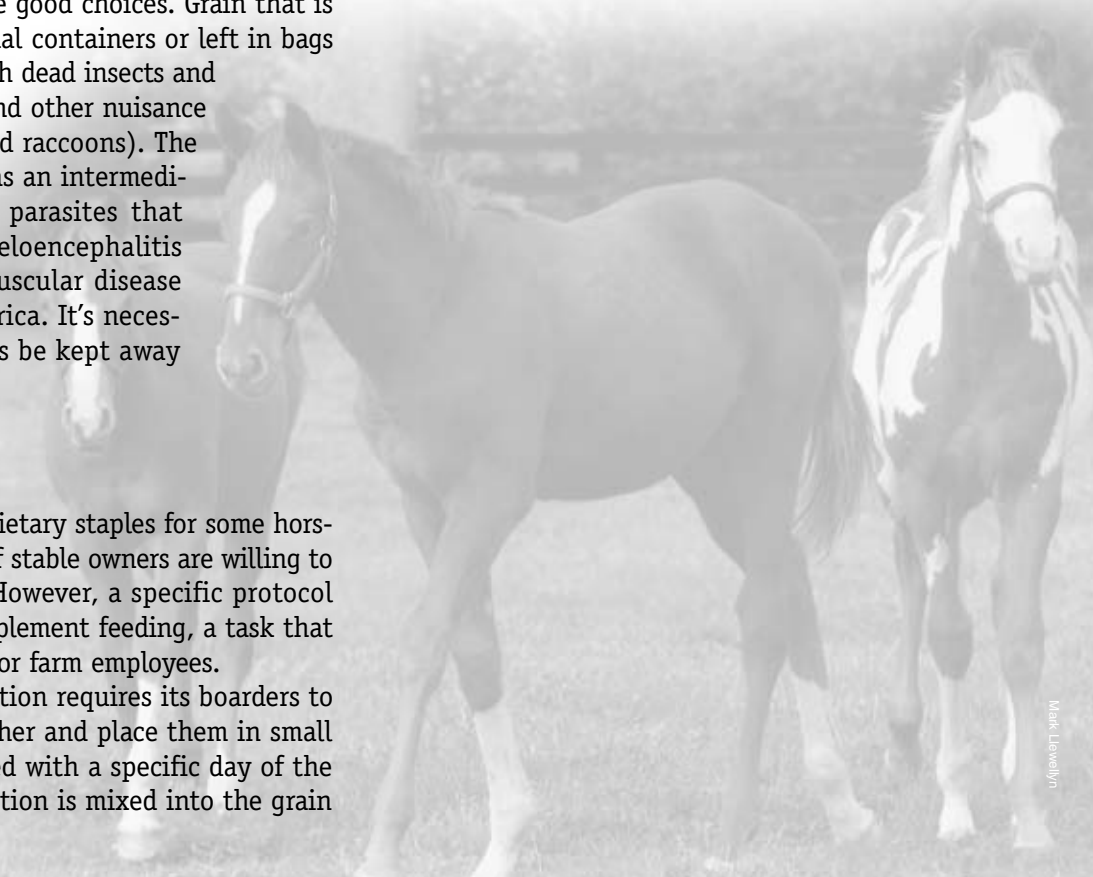
meal by barn personnel at the designated feeding time. Liquid supplements (such as corn oil) are then top-dressed to the grain and supplement mixture.

Some facilities agree to feed all supplements only at a specific feeding such as in the morning or evening. While the daily allotments of most supplements can be given in one feeding, there are some that must be divided into multiple meals. A two-pound serving of rice bran, for example, must be divided into separate meals.

## SPECIAL CASES

Will caretakers take the measures necessary to accommodate horses that require individual care? For instance, some research supports the notion that thoroughly wetting hay helps to alleviate respiratory problems. This can be a labor-intensive chore, and some stable owners may not be willing to commit to the extra care. The same holds true for soaking hay cubes or mixing a bran mash. Make sure that you and the stable owner understand each other's expectations.

Proper nutrition is a critical aspect of horse care. While boarding does alleviate the everyday chores associated with horse ownership, it's ultimately up to individual owners to ensure their horses are properly nourished. 



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