

Animal Sciences **Horses**

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Introduction to Housing for Horses

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Owning a horse can be an incredibly rewarding experience. However, certain decisions must be made if you are going to be prepared for this undertaking. One of the biggest decisions is choosing a place to keep your horse. Boarding a horse at a stable is the most convenient method for most people, but it is generally more expensive than keeping the horse at home, and you will miss the pleasure of having your horse right outside your back door. It normally costs from \$200-450 per month to board a horse, depending on the stable services.

Extra care and training services or riding lessons may increase the rate. If there is an indoor arena, trails, or other expensive facilities, the price may be higher. Certainly, boarding has the advantage of freeing you from the daily chores and management responsibilities, as well as providing a nicer place to ride the horse than you may have available at home. Most boarding stables charge extra for additional services such as worming, vaccinations, and hoof care. There are stables where the cost is less if you are willing to clean stalls, provide feed, or feed your own horse.

The alternative to boarding is to keep the horse at your own home. Many owners derive great enjoyment from seeing their horses out the back window, and the convenience of using them whenever they wish. Keeping your horse at home, of course, requires space, time, and the necessary equipment to facilitate horse care. The horse is completely dependent upon you for its daily care and depends on your knowledge of its needs. Depending on your location and your existing facility, it may not be cheaper to keep the horse at home than to board, especially if you have to make a significant investment in renovating or building facilities. You need to plan for shelter, fencing, bedding, hay, concentrates, equipment and storage, manure disposal, and facility repair.

A mature horse will cost about \$1100 to maintain annually at home, and a minimum of \$2400 annually at

a boarding facility. If you intend to breed, travel, or compete, it will cost more because you pay for a trailer, training fees, transportation, clothes, and tack.

This publication reviews the basic needs of the horse and discusses the management considerations important to the horse's comfort and health that need to be met to keep your horse at your home, or board it elsewhere. References providing more detailed information are listed at the end of the article.

Housing

Before choosing housing for your horse, ask yourself the following questions:

What are the horse's needs?

- The animal only needs shelter from the wind and weather, and a dry place to eat. Don't confuse what will make you as the horse owner more comfortable with the horse's basic needs.

What do I intend to do with my horse?

- If you want to show early in the year, you will need a place to ride all year, and possibly a covered arena to condition your horse.

What can I afford?

- You can spend as much as you want to on a horse facility. Estimate \$7 per square foot of floor space as the absolute minimum cost for building an enclosed barn for horses. Cost of renovation of an existing barn will depend on the condition and purpose of the original barn.

The answers to these questions should help you find housing appropriate for your horse. It is often possible to remodel an existing building to accommodate horses rather than to build a new one. If your horse is primarily for casual riding in the summer or fall, then a three-sided shed or cold barn is adequate. As you expect more from your horse, you will have to provide it with more protection from the weather and with more elaborate working facilities.

Placement

The barn should be at an elevation at least one foot above the surrounding terrain to maximize drainage. This is especially true of closed barns for keeping horses indoors. Barns often become flooded if their drainage is not well planned, and the excessive moisture causes hoof problems for the horse, and general building maintenance challenges. If you are building a new barn, plan the total layout of your potential facility before deciding where to build the first structure. If you live in an urban, or highly populated area, you also need to check with your local zoning board to see if they have regulations regarding the placement of a structure relative to lot lines, or other structures.

Outdoor Shelter

Three-sided sheds placed to provide protection from the prevailing winds (north or west in Indiana), provide excellent windbreak and shelter for broodmares or pleasure animals. These shelters are normally 8 to 10 feet high for adequate head clearance. Allow 100 square feet per horse in the shelter. If horses are to be group fed in bunks in the shelter, make sure there is adequate room for the horses to eat. The sheds can be built of lumber or metal, or bought commercially (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Three sided run-in shed.

Stalls

Although tie stalls are used less commonly now than they were at one time, they can still provide adequate housing for horses, especially if space is limited. If a horse is to be housed in a tie stall, it is important that the horse has been taught to stand quietly. Tie stalls should be at least 5 feet wide, and 10 feet long. It is imperative that horses that are housed in tie stalls are exercised daily, and that they are turned out when possible.

Box stalls allow the animal more freedom of movement than tie stalls. Stalls should be at least 10 feet x 10 feet for a standard riding horse. If the stall is going to house broodmares and foals, the stalls should be a minimum of 10 feet x 14 feet. A common practice is to have a removable wall between two stalls that can be taken out if a larger stall is needed for an especially large horse, or for a broodmare.

Regardless of the type of stall selected, stalls should be constructed of a hardwood and be treated to deter the horse from wood chewing. Although pine may be less expensive initially, the horse may quickly chew its way through the walls, requiring repair. The floor of the stall should be a crushed rock base covered with clay or field lime, but sand or soil also can be used. Sand and soil are less stable than packed clay or lime, and will have a greater tendency to develop holes and low spots. They do allow drainage, and are forgiving to the horse's legs, making them better options than harder surfaces. Cement and asphalt are sometimes used for stall floors, and have some definite disadvantages. Both are slippery and do not allow drainage. They are not recommended for stalls because they are so hard on the horse's legs. An advantage to these hard floors is they can be much more effectively sanitized than stalls with dirt or clay floors. For this reason, you will often see stalls with concrete or asphalt floors in veterinary clinics or veterinary hospitals. If you have no option except to have concrete or asphalt floors, liberal use of bedding, and the use of rubber mats on the floor may alleviate some of the difficulties associated with them. All stalls should have proper ventilation and drainage, and be equipped with water and feed containers.

Bedding

The type of bedding used depends upon the availability, price, and suitability of materials. Wood shavings and straw are both excellent bedding materials; however, they can be expensive or hard to obtain. Contact local furniture or lumber manufacturers, or wheat and oat farmers as possible sources for shavings and straw. You will have a better chance of obtaining straw from the farmers if you contact them early (before July), regarding purchasing straw. Other acceptable bedding materials include peat moss, rice hulls, peanut hulls, sawdust, and paper pulp. On a dirt floor, 3 to 4 inches of bedding is usually adequate. If the stall floor is asphalt or cement based, bedding should be at least 8 to 10 inches deep. If you are planning your own facility, be sure to plan for storage space for the kind of bedding you choose. Straw will take up the most room and make the largest manure pile. If you choose to compost your manure, sawdust and shavings will take longer to decompose than straw. It is important that whatever bedding material you choose is clean and dust free. If you opt for wood shavings, they must not contain any black walnut shavings, which are toxic to horses and can cause laminitis.

Fencing

Safe and adequate fencing is a vital part of a horse facility. All horses should be allowed as much outside, free exercise as possible. This will reduce the incidence of stable vices, as well as contribute to the general overall health of the

horse. This is especially true in the case of foals and young horses, who have fewer problems with respiratory diseases, and more normal bone development, when they are housed outside and allowed unlimited exercise.

Fencing material should be sturdy, yet not injure an animal caught in it. The most common types of fencing are wooden post and hardwood board, post and rail, poly vinyl chloride (PVC), woven wire, electrified wire, or a combination of them. All line fences should be at least 4 feet high, and solidly constructed. As a general rule, the smaller the paddock (fenced area), the stronger the fences need to be. Wooden fences are very eye appealing, but cost and maintenance can be high. Poly vinyl chloride fencing is becoming increasingly popular because you can get the look of wooden fence, without the maintenance. However, PVC is a more expensive option than many of the others. High tensile fence is an economical option, but is not recommended for line fences. It is important that when using any type of electric fence that it is visible to the horse, and the horse perceives it as a barrier. Serious injury can result if the horse disrespects the fence and runs into it, becomes entangled in the wire or causes it to break. This is especially true with high tensile fence. If high tensile fence snaps, the release of the tension creates incredible velocity in the wire, and the wire can cause significant injury.

If the pasture is intended to provide for the primary nutritional requirements for the horse, make sure it is large enough, and has sufficient high-quality forage to support the horse, and any pasture mates. Pasture should be mowed regularly to reduce weeds, and to maintain the quality of the forage. Tall, over mature, overgrown pastures offer minimal nutrition.

Summary

As you can see, there are many things to be considered when selecting housing for your horse, either at home, or at a boarding facility. Initially, you may prefer boarding the horse with someone else. If you own more than one horse, the right decision may be to bring them home. Managing horses takes a lot of planning, time, and dollars, so the more research and fact finding you can do before selecting a boarding stable, or building or renovating facilities at home, the greater the chance of having a positive experience for both you and the horse. This has been a brief review of the housing needs for horses. Refer to the listed publications for further details. Contact your county Extension office, or the Extension Web site, for copies of these and other publications on horse management.

For more information:

AS- 418 Fencing for Horses in Indiana

AS-554-W Introduction to Horse Management

AS-552-W Introduction to Body Condition Scoring Horses

DVD-4-H-995 Our First Horse: Considerations before you Buy DVD; <http://www.ourfirsthorse.info>

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