Horse Husbandry, Part 1

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If you’ve got a few acres, you’ve probably thought about getting some horses. This pair of articles will help those of you who are considering becoming horse owners to understand the basics of horse care and management. Additional references for more information will be mentioned at the end of this short article.

Logically, it is best to prepare for a horse before you actually bring one home. This means obtaining proper housing, fencing, feed, tack and equipment. You should also check with your state Department of Ecology for information on water quality ordinances and manure management regulations. It is important to know what you are going to do with all that manure that will soon start accumulating! In our climate, horses don’t necessarily need box stalls to bed down in every night; many get by very nicely with three-sided, run-in sheds. What’s important is for a shelter to protect a horse from wind, rain and sun. Situate a shed so that the back protects against the prevailing winds. Don’t neglect to provide year-round shelter – sadly many horses in our area are left out to bake in the burning summer heat without any shade whatsoever.

If you’ll soon have another mouth to feed, you’ve got to figure out where the groceries will come from. We have many excellent sources of a variety of hays in the Mid-Columbia area. Contact your Extension office or local hay growers’ association for a list of affiliated growers. When selecting hay, look for green forage with lots of leaves. Stems should be fine, not coarse. Open several bales and look in the middle; you don’t want to see or smell mold, weeds, moisture or other debris. The type of hay you need will depend on what your horse does, but most horses can maintain themselves nicely on a good quality grass or grass-alfalfa hay. You will get the best price for hay if you can purchase large quantities at one time. Some producers will deliver and/or stack the hay for you.

The nutritional needs of the majority of horses can be met with good quality hay, water and trace-mineralized salt. A handful of grain in the morning and evening as a reward of bonding activity is fine, but many well-meaning owners actually overfeed their horses and thereby risk a close encounter with undesirable horse ailments such as founder, obesity and some forms of
colic. Animals that definitely need supplemental energy and protein include those that are pregnant, lactating, growing, working hard, or stressed (ill, cold, etc.).

In a perfect world, every horse would be groomed every day. Grooming improves coat quality and skin health, alerts the owner to recent injuries or growths, promotes contact between the owner and horse, and makes the horse more comfortable by removing mud and burrs. When grooming, don’t forget to pick up and clean out all four feet. Keep an eye out for foreign objects such as rocks, sticks, nails or glass that could be wedged into the sole. Also stay alert for the foul smell of thrush so it can be treated quickly; this disorder is most common in the grooves of the frog or quarters of horses kept in wet areas.

At least once a year every horse should receive a vaccination against tetanus. Eastern Equine Encephalitis and Western Equine Encephalitis. Depending on the number of horses you have and what you do with them, you may also want to consider vaccinating them against Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis, influenza, rhinopneumonitis, Strangles, Potomac Fever and Lyme Disease. Horses can also be vaccinated against rabies, but the risk here is low. Pregnant horses and young stock require additional vaccines and/or a different schedule; work with your vet to make sure these animals get all the vaccinations they need.

It’s hard to describe the best worming schedule because there isn’t one. Worming properly is a balance between economics and good medicine. Preventable, parasite-related problems can and do kill horses. Work with your veterinarian to develop a personalized worming program that takes into account the density of the horse population on your acreage, your method of feeding, pasture management, manure management, goals, finances, chemical resistance and other factors. Fecal examinations are a good way to monitor the need for worming. Many of the excellent over-the-counter wormers now available, although expensive, enable horse owners to administer highly-effective wormers simply and quickly. Keep in mind that worming is especially important in young stock, and worm burdens blossom during wet conditions.

Here is an editorial comment: Please don’t breed your horse unless you intend to enter the world of professional and serious horse breeding. There are already PLENTY of horses in the area. Unless you are a pretty good judge of horseflesh, the new horse you decide to create will probably not advance its bread. Also, foaling tragedies occasionally occur and it would be a shame to lose a nice mare to the whim of an unnecessary breeding. Please leave the breeding to our local professionals and buy a started animal from them – it’s actually cheaper, too!

More next time; until then, here are some references that contain more detailed information:

Resources:

WSU Publications:
Non-Irrigated Pastures for Horses in Eastern Washington, EB 0705
Irrigated Pastures for Horses in Eastern Washington, EB 0706
Recommended Vaccinations for Washington Horses, EB 1283
Horse Waste and Land Management Manual, EM 4806

Feeding the Performance Horse, EB 1612.

Horse Industry Handbook: A Guide to Equine Care and Management

OSU on-line publications:
http://eesc.orst.edu/agcomwebfile/search/searchresults.lasso

Lots of links at:
http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/library/

Horse publications:
http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/exten/horses/

http://persephone.agcom.purdue.edu/AgCom/Pubs/ansci.htm#4

http://www.ces.uga.edu/pubs/pubsubj.html#AnimalScience

http://www.aces.edu/department/extcomm/publications/anr/anranisci.html#horses

Commercial site with good links:
http://www.haynet.net

http://www.equusite.com