



GOOD FENCES MAKE HAPPY HORSES

Happy horses also need a place that's sturdy and safe

By *Brandon Greet*

Those considering buying a horse should think about shelter and fence requirements in addition to feed.

Shelter and fencing can become major projects requiring a large amount of capital.

Basics for Horses

Fences can enhance the aesthetics, value, and safety of a property. However, a poorly maintained, haphazard fence can do the opposite.

A fence needs to be sturdy yet safe for the animals – with some “give” to minimize impact. It should be visible and high enough to discourage jumping, with no sharp edges or openings

that could trap a head or hoof.

Fence height depends on the horses. In general, fences should be 54 to 60 inches high, but this could change if the horses are larger, stallions, or adept jumpers. The bottom rail should be 8 to 12 inches above the ground to keep from trapping hooves and preventing foals from escaping while not allowing horses to reach under the fence.

Fence openings should be either large enough so that there is little chance a leg, hoof, or head can get caught or should be small enough that even a small hoof cannot get into the opening. In general, rails or strands should be about 12 inches

apart. If horses will be neighboring each other, building a double fence may be a good idea, although more costly. Create an alley at least 3 feet wide. This prevents horses from leaning across the fence. Horses tend to test fence strength, whether deliberately or through casual use.

Pay attention to fence posts. Be sure they are dug deeply into the ground and properly set. They should generally be set about 3 feet into the ground. In sandy soils, they may need to be set deeper. Wooden posts 8 to 12 feet apart are most common for horse fences. Treated posts will often last four times as long as untreated posts. Rails or wire should

be attached to the “horse side” of the posts. The horses will then push a wire (or rail) against a post instead of popping out nails or staples if the wire was on the outside of a post. This strengthens the fence while increasing the safety of the fence if smooth fasteners are used.

Strong Gates

Gate design generally follows the same rules as fence design: they must be strong and safe. Gates built out of steel tubing with smooth corners are common and a good choice for horse gates. Avoid gates with diagonal bracing. Even though they are often stronger, narrow angles can easily trap legs and feet. Gates need to be as tall as the fence and in general should be 12 to 16 feet wide to allow vehicles to pass through. Gates that vehicles don't need to pass through should be about 5 feet wide and no less than 4. Horses sometimes like to congregate around gates – the fence on either side of a gate should be especially sturdy and visible.

Put gates in corners if horses are going to be herded through the gates because the corner acts like a funnel to direct the horses to the gate. Otherwise, gates can be put in the middle of a fenceline when horses will be moved individually. In this case, locate gates where convenient. Consider which way you want the gate to swing and if you will need extra width to drive through the gate.

Other considerations when designing fences are trees, feeding and watering areas, grazing control, and crowded areas. Horses damage trees by stripping bark and breaking branches. Feeding and watering areas should not be put in corners or other areas where one horse can prevent

access to others. Corners should also be rounded if possible so that bullied horses can more easily escape.

Use a grazing management plan to design efficient fencing. Lastly, if there are areas horses congregate or crowd each other, this area of the fence needs to be reinforced.

Safe Shelters

Design shelters to be safe and comfortable for horses and handlers. The size of a horse and the amount of time the horse spends in the stall help determine stall size. A 12-by-12-foot stall is standard for a 1,000-pound horse. Generally, the wall length of a stall should be 1½ times the horse's length. Shelters commonly have 10- to 12-foot high ceilings. Low ceilings inhibit air circulation and increase the risk of a horse striking its head. An 8-foot high partition is standard to separate stalls.

Stall doorways should be at least 8-foot tall by 4-foot wide. Swinging doors should swing out of the stall. Sliding doors can conserve space but require quality tracks and stops. Doors should have less than 3 inches of space underneath them to prevent the horse from getting a hoof stuck.

Lighting

At least 4 square feet of window space is needed to naturally light a stall. One electrical fixture in the center of the stall can create shadows making it difficult to visually examine a horse in the stall, and shadows can also frighten horses as they move in, out, and around the stall. Fixtures along the front or side-walls will decrease these shadows. Fixtures should be installed at least 8 feet high to minimize contact with the horse. Shatterproof cages placed around all light fixtures are great for added safety. All electrical wiring in



The economics of owning a horse were examined in the spring *Barnyards & Backyards* magazine

the shelter should be in metal or hard plastic conduit to prevent rodents from chewing into the wires. Check any local building codes.

Make fresh air available. A window that opens in each stall and eave and ridge vents provide fresh air exchange. A separate space for storing feed and tack is recommended. Feed and tack piled in horse shelters can inhibit airflow.

Flooring becomes very important if horses will be kept inside for long periods. A good floor absorbs the impact from horse hooves and has a durable, nonslip surface. Rubber mats and deep bedding placed on concrete floors can increase impact absorption; however, rubber mats may become slick when wet. The surface should be easy to clean.

Carefully planning fences and shelters will help horse owners estimate costs, avoid injury to horses, and ensure they get the most out of their investments.

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