

Feeding The Boarded Horse

By: Eric Haydt

All horses are individuals. Some you just cannot keep weight on while others seem to get fat just breathing, or they may have different protein needs based on their age. If you have your horses at home, it allows you the flexibility to feed each horse individually. Unfortunately, in a boarding situation, much of that flexibility is lost. The cost of boarding is already taxing your budget and the barn manager will not reduce your board to feed your horse a different feed. Don't feel like you're all alone, many horse owners face the same problem.

How do barn managers and owners pick the feed they use? Many barn managers, like Joyce Ainsworth of Hi Hope Farm in Jeffersonton, Virginia, look to find a feed with the best quality at the most reasonable price. She discourages horse owners bringing in their own feeds to avoid confusion at feeding time, but she understands that all horses are individuals and may require additional needs and will feed supplements provided by the owner. Martie Samuels, who owns Mill Stone Farm in Washington, New Jersey, adds "I want to buy a feed that is balanced without the need to add supplements. Often, people tend to buy the cheapest feed and add a lot of supplements, which is more expensive in the long run." Like Joyce, she will feed supplements if the owner provides them, but will not allow any boarding discounts if the owner provides their own feed. Quality of grain and hay at boarding stables runs the whole range from the best to the worst.

If you're not happy at all with the way your horse is performing or the way it looks on the board feeding program, you have some options. First, change the feed program that your horse is on to one more suited for the situation. The main problem here is that many of the barn managers, like Joyce and Martie, don't even offer this as an option. If bringing in your own feed is an option, there typically is no decrease in board so you end up paying an additional \$30.00 to \$40.00 per month in feed on top of the normal boarding cost. In some situations, such as geriatric horses, a specialized feed is the only solution.

The second option is to feed your horse some type of supplement to correct the situation. This is usually the best option because most barn managers do recognize the difference in horses and try to accommodate their customers. At this point, you need to analyze what the problem is. Is your horse too thin, too fat, pregnant, mineral deprived, insufficient fiber, etc.

For horses that are too thin, you need to look at all the reasons why this may occur such as deworming schedules, pasture time, and amount of grain and hay fed. One supplemental product, rice bran, typically works well to solve underweight problems. Stabilized Rice Bran is an all natural product that provides extra calories in the form of fat. Do not confuse rice bran with wheat bran that you may "mash" your horse with. I like to tell people that the two products are like water skiing and snow skiing. They are both referred to as skiing but that is pretty much where the similarities end. Rice Bran contains 20% fat and naturally high levels of Vitamin E and iron. You feed 1 to 2 pounds of Rice

Bran per day for optimum weight gains and the side benefit of improved hair coat condition. It typically takes 4 to 5 weeks to really see the benefits of Rice Bran so do not expect overnight miracles.

Another problem with some thin horses is that they do not get enough good fiber in their diet. Horse owners often overlook the importance of the energy horses derive from their natural food stuff. Pasture and hay quality, and sometime quantity, is something the boarder has very little control over. One way to improve the feeding situation is through fiber supplements. Most people think that supplements have to come in little buckets with little scoops, but not so with the concept of fiber supplements. Using straight alfalfa cubes, cubes mixed with alfalfa and timothy or chopped forage products go a long way to improve overall fiber quality at about 4 to 5 pounds per day.

Overweight horses can be as much of a problem as underweight horses. To take weight off a horse you have to restrict the diet, both grain and hay or pasture, or exercise the horse more often. Remember when feeding horses, grain rations are limited in vitamin and mineral fortification. You usually need to feed 5 to 8 pounds of a grain ration to balance all the vitamin and mineral requirements. In the case of overweight horses, feeding that much grain is not practical, so you need to feed a supplement that provides the additional requirements in one package. Be careful on mixing various supplements that provide only a portion of what you need and then needing to mix additional supplements to make up for what is missing. This may duplicate other nutrients that may cause some forms of toxicity and certainly is more costly. Plus, the more supplements required, the harder for the stable employee to keep each feeding consistent.

Finally, recognize that certain horses require different levels of protein. Pregnant mares and horses under two need more protein than a mature horse. Boarding farms often offer only one protein option. In a barn where there are different ages of horses, barn managers often will use a 12% protein diet because it falls between the protein needs of many horses. You can alter the protein content for horses that need extra protein with supplements that provide extra protein and the supplemental vitamins and minerals mentioned for overweight horses.

Just a reminder, never overlook the importance of clean, fresh, water at all times along with free choice salt.

Triple Crown Nutrition offers a complete line of products to fit every boarding situation mentioned in this article. Please call us at 800-267-7198 if we can answer any of your feeding questions.

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