

Caring for Old and Retired Horses



This factsheet provides information about options for owners who face the problems of caring for elderly or retired horses

When a horse or pony reaches the end of its active working life and, for whatever reason, can no longer be ridden or otherwise employed, it can be a difficult decision about what to do with the animal.

Quality of life is the most important factor in making decisions

When the decision is made to retire a horse from useful work, due to old age, infirmity or disease, the owner will have several options open:

The first two questions which have to be asked are these;

- Am I willing and able to provide this horse with a happy and comfortable retirement?
- Would it be kinder to have him humanely destroyed at once?

Before you reject the second question out of hand, think seriously about the first – and remember the promises to which an affirmative answer will commit you.

Affection, sentiment, grateful memories... some, or a mixture of all these, are sure to play a part in your decision. But neither your own feelings nor those of any other human being – your family, for instance – should ever be allowed to obscure the truth, which is that, at times like this, the long-term interests of the horse itself must outweigh every other consideration. There is nothing strange or wrong about devotion to an old and valued friend – and nothing more natural than to hate the thought of being involved in its destruction. But those are your feelings, not the horse's.

What counts for him is the quality of life which you are able to provide. So, before answering those first two questions, you must ask yourself another.

Have I the money, time, determination and facilities to provide the sort of retirement this horse can be expected to enjoy? Because, make no mistake, the obligations you would be taking on are neither light nor cheap and it is not uncommon for horses to live well beyond 30 years.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS AND NEEDS

Food and water

Eating and drinking are central to any horse's health and happiness, so the first priority has to be an unlimited supply of clean fresh water and plenty of nourishing palatable food. Any owner unable to provide both should go back to our original questions and think again. Grass was the horse's original staple diet and, in the natural state, he grazed almost continuously. But for eight or nine months of the year, from October to May, grass loses so much of its nutritive value that the diet of a retired horse living out will need to be supplemented – preferably twice a day with hay for essential roughage and oats, nuts or some other 'hard' heat-generating food. The colder the weather, the more supplementary food a horse will need.

Grazing and Space

The more space a horse can have the better. Horses are such untidy, selective grazers and so apt to be put off by their own droppings, that two small paddocks are much more useful than a single large one.

Paddocks quickly become sour and 'horsesick' unless the grass is regularly 'topped' or cut to a length of between four and six inches. Ideally droppings should be picked up, but otherwise paddocks should be harrowed and rolled as soon as the horses move out.

Paddocks should also be grazed by other animals. Sheep are a better alternative than cattle as they control parasitic larvae more effectively. The occasional horse will chase a cow, but otherwise dehorned cattle can be quite safely turned out with horses. If a horse has to be on its own, cattle can be welcome company. It is essential always to follow a regular worming programme regardless of the age of the horse.

Paddocks should be carefully inspected for dangerous holes. Although smart wooden posts and rails are not essential, all fencing must be examined for projecting nails and other sharp protruding edges. Barbed wire should never be used, but plain wire or preferably electrified tape, properly stretched between good posts, can be perfectly adequate if properly maintained.

Warmth and Shelter

Cold – especially a cold, wet wind – and flies are the turned out horse's most hated enemies. The coat of a non-working horse should be allowed to grow and, except when problems like lice or mud-fever need to be dealt with, he should not be groomed. Even a thoroughbred will soon develop its own thick, greasy, virtually rainproof overcoat. Using New Zealand rugs on retired horses who are permanently out at grass is not usually essential as it can hinder the horse's ability to grow a thick greasy coat which is essential to keep him warm.

The colder the weather, the more supplementary food a horse will need. Food should be increased BEFORE horses start to lose condition and their weight and condition should be monitored at regular intervals. A degree of weight loss is inevitable in extremely old horses, i.e. 30 years and over.

Another important aid to warmth and comfort is shelter – from wind and rain in winter and from flies in summer. The dry cold of a frosty night without much wind does not seem to bother a well fed horse. Nevertheless, if loose boxes are available you may find that you sleep better yourself if your pensioners are brought in at night during the worst winter weather. They will almost certainly be happier if brought in during the day in late summer – when the flies are at their most troublesome. A fringed browband is, in the writer's experience, at least as effective as the various fly-repellents on the market.

Horses are good at making the best of any natural shelter provided by trees or contours. They are infuriatingly apt not to use any elaborate artificial field-shelters you may erect. Nevertheless a simple three-sided field-shelter need not be too expensive. About twelve feet high it should obviously open away from the prevailing wind. Larger shelters intended for several horses should have more than one doorway so that a dominant animal cannot block the only exit. Roofless windbreaks give little or no protection against rain or sleet and would only be desirable if there are no hedges, trees or other natural shelter of any kind.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Company

Horses are gregarious creatures and a vast majority of them have, in one way or another, been used to company. Solitary retirement into a lonely field should not be contemplated. The companion need not, however, be a horse. Many old horses have become close friends with cows, sheep, goats or donkeys.

If several horses are turned out together a 'pecking order' is soon established but bullying is not unknown. When a newly retired horse is turned out with new companions they should be watched to make sure the newcomer is not maltreated after the initial settling in.

Regular visits

Most horses are used to, and enjoy regular contact with humans. In any case, all horses turned out to grass should be visited and inspected, by someone who knows what to look for, at least twice a day. Only for very special reasons should that minimum be reduced to a single visit.

MAINTENANCE – FEET AND TEETH

No foot, no horse – and although the feet of very old horses virtually stop growing, the regular attention of a good farrier is essential. With advancing years comes the increasing risk of arthritis. But shoes are an extra expense and not usually necessary provided the feet are regularly inspected.

A horse's teeth are vital to its digestion and health and should be inspected and, if necessary, rasped by an expert at least once a year. If the expert is a veterinary surgeon, he can check the pensioner's heart and general well-being on the same visit.

If you and your facilities can measure up to these requirements, the reward for any lover of horses will surely be worth more than any money you have spent – the delight of watching an old friend live out its final years in comfort and security.

But that delight imposes one more responsibility – your duty to decide when it should end.

Here again, it is not your feelings that matter but the interests of the horse. They must not be kept alive one day longer for your, or any other human's pleasure. The moment their life, for whatever reason, becomes a burden, the decision, however painful, must be made.

If at all possible the horse should be put down at home in familiar surroundings. If this is impossible and the horse has to be humanely destroyed away from his home, you must ensure your directions as to the treatment of the animal are observed once the horse has been handed over to the veterinary surgeon or licenced slaughterman. It is of paramount importance to ensure that your wishes are carried out and the horse is taken direct to a recognised slaughterhouse by yourself or a responsible person who remains with the horse until it is put down.

A wise man once wrote that one of the worst things about life is the number of dogs and horses we outlive. He was not far wrong but it may be some slight consolation to feel, in the end, that you have done your best.

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