

The Unwanted Horse

Horses and their owners come in all shapes and sizes. For example, there are professionals who make their livings with horses. Their horses are usually specifically bred for the discipline of interest and they are capable of dealing with the idiosyncrasies of the breed. Also, there are horse-crazy little girls who dream of owning a magnificent horse like the black stallion. They typically do not have the skills required to deal with the horse of their dreams. Additionally, there are people who just like to see a horse in the pasture when they look out the back window. While these horses might have fairly low expectations for performance, their personalities will determine if they are a good fit for the low-involvement owner.

Few laws dictate the specifics of minimum care for horses, but general principles can apply. There are laws regarding neglect of animals that may apply if minimal care is not provided. Basic nutrition needs must be met. This means providing water and access to hay or pasture. Shelter needs vary widely by climate and season. Ideally, in cold weather, horses need to be dry and out of the wind. This does not mean they have to be in a barn and, in fact, some horses cannot tolerate being in a barn where the air quality is inferior to being outside. In hot weather, shade is important. Besides meeting housing and nutritional needs, the well-cared for horse has farrier and veterinary care on a regular basis.

The cost of providing care for a horse can range from monthly board at a full-care facility to kicking the horse out into an unused pasture for the summer. While the latter can mean minimal out-of-pocket dollars day-to-day, the cost of purchasing the land, building the fence, maintaining the fence, paying taxes on the land, and maintaining the pasture are not insignificant.

Horses are commonly living into their thirties. Some of these geriatric horses are still quite active and healthy enough to be ridden. Others are enjoying retirement. Others are getting by with minimal care.

Many of us are excited to have a horse to pursue trail riding or showing or other activities. Few of us think about arranging for the horse's life-long care. If our horse becomes unable to perform our chosen activities, what is the next step? If your activity is eventing and your horse won't stay sound going over grueling cross-country courses, he may still be able to do flat work for a person just learning to ride. But what if your horse isn't sound. What if he has a personality that makes him difficult to get along with? Or, what if he is a stallion with special housing and handling requirements? Are you prepared to provide for his needs until he dies of old age?

Rescues and shelters exist, but they are usually over capacity and underfunded. Should the responsibility of caring for a retired horse lay with strangers who have a soft spot in their heart for horses or with the people who shared a time with the horse in his prime? Few of us have the resources to keep every horse we have ever owned and many of those horses go on to a series of homes where they lead varying but nonetheless productive lives. Ultimately, however, end-of-life choices and care are inevitable.

As a horse owner or as someone who is in a position to advise horse owners, we should promote a life-plan for horses. This starts with responsible breeding. Do not indiscriminately breed horses. If you breed horses, prepare the foals for productive lives. Train them to be caught, led, and tied. Train them to stand for the farrier and veterinarian. Schedule appointments with those professionals for timely

foot and health care. Preventative care can keep the horse healthy and comfortable. This eliminates, or at least delays, the need for special care or treatment which can be very costly. Castrating males is the responsible choice for almost every colt. Ovariectomizing females is becoming more common and is a very appropriate option for mares with estrus-cycle-related behavior issues. Training the horse at an appropriate age to be ridden, or driven, or whatever it is you want to do with the horse is important.

Understandably, this sequence of events in the life of a horse might seem obvious to many, and yet many horses do not get these opportunities and privileges. It is very difficult to find a home for a 13-year-old "project" horse with no training and a mean spirit. If a good-hearted, novice horse-owner takes a chance on this particular train wreck, it will not be a positive experience for the horse or the owner. This horse needs a salesman to convince sequential owners to provide adequate life-long care. Some of them get lucky, others don't. Doing our part to prepare the horse to be easily marketed makes it more likely that this horse will get adequate care.

As advocates for animals, we should promote preparing horses for a successful life, supporting them through their productive years, transitioning them into retirement, and assisting owners with end-of-life decisions. Castrating males and preventing inappropriate matings are critical to reducing the numbers of unwanted horses. Educating owners and potential owners is an important piece. Being an advocate for the horse is vital.