

How Much?

Maybe it is *too* easy to own a horse these days.

Why do I say that? A person doesn't need to have any horse knowledge or horsemanship skills before buying or getting a horse – although, thankfully, most people do have some idea before they take the plunge. And anyone can own a horse and can own as many horses as they like.

The big challenge in this situation is, how much is enough? How much knowledge and skill does a person or household need before the horse arrives? A subjective question I know, but it arises because it would seem that there are many horse-human relationships that could probably be better if there was a higher level of skill and horsemanship displayed by the human.

Back in the days of high school, one of the most boring subjects I suffered at the time was Economics. One of the concepts I did understand though was 'supply and demand'. Today in this country it would appear that the supply of horses exceeds demand. That is why there are so many cheap horses available and why just about anybody can own one, and sadly, that is why so many quite good horses are sent to the doggers.

The reasons for owning a horse, or horses, have as much variety as the horses themselves. Some people want to win a Melbourne Cup with their horse and others just want to look at them grazing peacefully in the paddock next to the house. In between these two polarized extremes is every other reason for owning a horse, including having a weekly hack, competing in an endurance event, playing polo, jumping, breeding for bucks, rough riding, stock work, harness driving, ground play, showing, barrels, cutting, dressage, spiritual development and healing, pony club, packing trips, western pleasure and trick riding, just to name a few. Within most of these pursuits are people who do 'it' (owning a horse) well and others who could perhaps do 'it' better.

A person doesn't even need money to acquire a horse.

The financial impact of having a horse will hit home once it arrives in the paddock. At a bare minimum it costs at least a thousand dollars per year to keep Mr Ed. Some reading this may say, "I wish". And some may say "That's waaay too much to spend on grass eating paddock ornament". And now you may start to see part of the problem that some horses have.

Meeting a horse's basic needs is the bare minimum of what is generally considered good horse care; and to define just what a horse's basic needs are we really should consult the expert here – the horse.

Most of the happy and healthy horses I know of need the following: Adequate and suitable feed available, *ad lib*, twenty four hours a day, and fed at ground level; adequate and clean water, again available at ground or near ground level; sufficient room to move around (walk, trot and canter); shelter from the extreme weather related elements; suitable and sufficient horse company for physical and mental stimulation; regular appropriate hoof care, regular dental care, parasite control; trace elements and minerals to match their requirements; body work as required and a good relationship with their human/s. Phew! Quite a list when it's put down like that.

If we ask the horse about these basic needs and how they can be met they may tell us that mixed organic pasture and pasture hay made from similar grass will

meet the majority of their needs. Water is a no brainer and it is interesting that often the water supplied to animals (including horses) we wouldn't consider drinking ourselves. Why is it OK for the animals then?

Sufficient room to move around doesn't mean a house block. It doesn't even mean a small square paddock. If you had to spend your days in a boring, flat, square paddock with maybe one or two trees for shade, would you go nuts? Why are horses any different? And consider what we need for a balanced diet compared to the commonly accepted diet for a horse, being a paddock of grass that grows on depleted soil; which in turn results in a mineral deficiency for the horse. For horses to be healthy they too need minerals and trace elements.

Very few horses I know of prefer rugs to the natural shade and shelter offered by trees and bushes. They just don't need them! Rugs are quite unnatural for a horse and despite all the marketing and fashions, they (horses) would be much better off without them if we met their natural need of having shelter. I am also a very strong advocate for banning the solo horse. In Sweden it is illegal to keep a horse by itself. What have the Swedes discovered that we haven't as yet? A solo horse is a sad, lonely and often depressed horse. A horse with horse company is, in the great majority of cases, a much happier and healthier horse. The type I like being around and having around.

One great step forward to making domestic horses lives better is the popular rise of people who carry out body work on horses. This could entail massage, chiropractic treatment, Equine Touch, acupuncture, Bowen therapy, photonic light therapy and a whole lot of other modalities. Whilst not all work on all horses, I have personally witnessed some quite dramatic improvements in horses' well being after various treatments by various practitioners. It is a fact that horses get sore and their bodies get out of balance by just being a horse. And more horses get sore and have body issues after partaking in activities with humans on their backs. The least we can do is make sure that we are in a position to firstly listen to and watch the horse to see if they are not happy and secondly, have some treatment carried out on the horse to relieve and perhaps cure some of their physical ailments. It's not too much to ask, is it? Yes, it may add to the cost of owning a horse but how often have you heard of a horse tipping or bucking their owner or rider off just so they can have relief from the pain in their bodies? Better a couple of hundred dollars spent on some chiro for the horse than the inconvenience and cost of nursing a broken arm, or worse, after a less than graceful (and unplanned) flight off the back of a horse.

It is really in our interests, as horse owners and carers, to have a goodly supply of proven and appropriate skill and information to be able to look after horses really well. We also have a duty of care to the horses to do this. If it improves their lives by learning and choosing the best ways of looking after our four legged companions, then surely it makes our lives better too.

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