

Making the Most of Small Horse Properties

As ranchettes grow in popularity and availability, horse owners are finding ways to maximize their space



On her 9-acre horse property, Yolanda Mayers opted for a six-stall barn with lean-tos and mud-free footing on either side of it.

COURTESY YOLANDA MAYERS

After purchasing 9 acres on Maryland's Eastern Shore to be used as a small sport horse breeding farm, Yolanda Mayers discovered many of the land's existing trees could not be cleared for pastures. And while the property proved otherwise ideal for her needs, this finding was problematic because it ultimately left her with roughly 5 acres on which to keep her six horses.

The reason for the restriction? Some of the land had been part of a reforestation project, meaning the existing trees held protected status.

With encroaching development, the need to live near workplaces, and rising property values, horse owners are housing their animals on increasingly smaller and more urban properties. This poses obvious challenges: limited grazing, minimal room for manure storage, close neighbors, and more. But by adopting key planning and management strategies,

owners can keep horses successfully on small properties—as Mayers has done.

Read the Fine Print

First and foremost, become familiar with municipal, county, and state regulations that might impact your operation. Consulting your local and county zoning and permit departments before buying, building, or renovating a farm can help you avoid surprises like Mayers'. Luckily for her, the forested tracts weren't a total loss as far as pastures go: She has permission to trim the lower limbs of the protected pine trees, which she fences off, using the pasture around them for grazing.

Parameters and specifications for a variety of issues might differ at city, county, and state levels, notes Karl Hoopes, DVM, equine extension assistant professor at Utah State University, in Logan. "Clarify ordinances yourself," he says. "For example, some areas in Utah have open range

laws; it is the landowner's responsibility to fence out livestock. If a property is not fenced out, the livestock owners are not liable for damage."

Consider the permissible number of horses per acre, how far structures must be from property lines, and irrigation and water rights, among other things, says Carissa Wickens, PhD, PAS, assistant professor and extension horse specialist at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. "Find planning and zoning contacts for your area. Get everything in writing," she says. "Here in Florida, the number of horses permitted on properties zoned for agriculture is variable from county to county. Even within equestrian estates, deed restrictions require that specific protocols are in place. However your property is zoned, carefully consider the number of horses your small acreage can support so as to avoid overstocking of small grazing paddocks."

Maximize Space

“When thinking of horse ownership on small acreage, all points tie into overarching planning efforts,” says Wickens, whether starting from scratch building a new facility or operating on an existing horse property.

Consider your individual needs. For example, if serious competition isn't your focus, perhaps you can forgo a traditional barn with a luxury tack room in favor of run-in sheds with greater turnout space.

When Mayers purchased her property the only existing structure was a house, so she could design the barn and pastures to suit her needs. And after 35 years in the horse industry, Mayers had a clear idea of how she wanted things to work. She installed a six-stall barn with lean-tos on mud-free footing along either side of the structure. Pastures, paddocks, and stalls are accessible by a gate system, which affords her nonhorse husband the option to bring horses in and out without having to handle them.

“If you are making major changes to your property, I recommend hiring a farm consultant to help design the property so everything flows for the number of horses and activities you'll be doing,” says Hoopes. “It's also a good idea to build according to the accepted (design) customs of your area.”

Also keep in mind any vehicle traffic, such as hay and shavings delivery; horses hauling in and out; farrier and veterinarian visits; and manure removal and spreading. Budget for space to turn a trailer around, as well as 10- to 12-foot gates through which large vehicles, including trucks and tractors, can pass.

Manage Your Manure

Regardless of discipline or breed, one thing is certain: Horses produce a lot of poop. When you're maintaining a limited herd on a small-scale property, there are several feasible ways to manage manure. Depending on your time and resources you might opt to collect stall waste in a dumpster or similar storage bin, which can be hauled away to a composting facility for a fee. Or with some effort, you might do the composting yourself.

As organic matter, manure and bedding decompose over time. When composted, stall waste transforms into an asset. “One of the things we are starting to recom-



COURTESY YOLANDA MAYERS

Familiarize yourself with local ordinances and regulations. Mayers discovered she couldn't clear these trees for pasture because the land was part of a reforestation project.

mend more is composting,” says Wickens. “Especially on a small acreage with a few horses, you can very inexpensively build a two- or three-bin system where you can store about four months of manure generation. Manure is a stable, slow-release fertilizer media that can then be put back on paddocks. It's really a worthwhile time investment. In addition, composting can help reduce the volume of collected manure and stall waste by as much as 40-60%.”

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DR. CARISSA WICKENS

Wickens recommends installing the bin system in an area convenient to the barn or paddocks. Deposit fresh stall waste into the first bin and, once it reaches the appropriate internal temperature, transfer it to the next bin, turning and aerating it in the process. If you have a third bin, allow the manure to ‘cure,’ which makes it even more stable and ready for application as a fertilizer. You can make bins using a variety of simple materials, including old boards or used shipping pallets.

“We need to stop thinking of manure as a waste product but, instead, as a valuable asset to our property,” says Hoopes. “Horse manure contains nitrogen,

phosphorus, and potassium; it's really beneficial to use as a fertilizer.”

Mayers handles manure using a dump trailer, which she either empties at the back of the property, away from the barn, or at the dump when full. “If I had room for storage of straw, I would bed on straw,” she says. “Mushroom farmers will come on a regular basis to collect the manure, but not with shavings, as pine shavings kill mushrooms.”

Whatever system you choose, be sure to contain manure and locate the pile away from nearby surface water or springsheds (areas within ground or surface water basins that contribute to spring flow).

For more information on planning and constructing composting bins and handling other manure management concerns, consult your state equine extension service for a best-management-practices manual, says Wickens, adding, “If there are manure management requirements for a given area, the Department of Environmental Protection and your state's Department of Agriculture are good resources to turn to. Be proactive. By having best management practices in place, if there is a question about your manure management, you are in compliance with guidelines.”

You can also find more information about composting at TheHorse.com/17205.

Say Goodbye to Flies

Flies go hand in hand with manure, so be sure to pick out paddocks, runs, and stalls regularly to help eliminate fly

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breeding areas on your small property.

Composting also minimizes fly presence. “Flies tend to lay eggs and develop larvae on the outer crust of manure piles,” Wickens says. “By composting, you turn and mix the material; the outer crust is then mixed into the inner pile and is heated.” Microorganisms generate heat as they break down the waste, killing fly egg larvae and pupae, as well as parasites and weed seeds.

Fly predators, tiny wasps that feed on fly larvae without bothering horses or people, are another option for controlling fly populations. Wickens says property owners anecdotally report limited success in the first year of use, with results evident after prolonged, targeted use.

Keep it Green

Keeping a small property mud-, dirt-, and dust-free is no small feat, but it’s possible. Mayers designed her farm with the goal of maximizing pasture while remaining realistic about what the land could handle. “On small acreage you really can’t have full-time field horses if you want pasture,” she says. She addressed this issue by dividing her land into multiple enclosures (one 2-acre field, two 1-acre fields, and two half-acre drylots).

Her drylots extend from around the barn area. “To construct them, I removed the top layer of soil and put down a textile barrier, then large, flat gravel, with crusher run (crushed stone) on top,” May-



To manage manure consider installing a compost bin system adjacent to your barn or paddocks.

ALAYNE BLICKLE

ers says. “The barn foundation is built up high; the ground slopes down to the pastures, draining to a pre-existing drainage ditch. The gravel also helps drainage. The barn gutters run into a French drain filled with rock and gravel.”

Wickens subdivides pastures to rotationally graze, letting paddocks rest before they are grazed too low. “They should remain at about 3 to 4 inches in height,” she says. “By allowing the pasture to rest, grass is able to regenerate. It’s management-intensive but effective.”

Mayers’ horses have access to grass

from April to December. From the end of December through March, they go on drylots while the pasture regenerates.

In winter grass is dormant and should rest; grazing in the nongrowing season damages plants and roots, causing erosion and allowing invasive weeds to gain a foothold. During this time plan to feed more hay, says Wickens, which you can have tested so you can formulate your horses’ diet accordingly.

Mayers allows horses to graze for two weeks on a pasture, then rotates them off to another pasture. After removing horses from a pasture, she drags it to break up manure and cuts the grass with a brush hog set on high, which helps keep weeds at bay. With this technique, her six horses have been able to graze the 5 acres through the warm seasons without damaging the grass stand.

When establishing her pastures, Mayers contacted her county agricultural agency, which loaned her tools for collecting soil samples they then analyzed, helping her formulate a plan for optimal seeds to plant and letting her know when pastures would be viable for grazing. Mayers recommends purchasing grass seed from your local co-op or agricultural supply to obtain a mix specific to your area.

Be a Good Neighbor

Consideration of those living around you goes a long way toward peaceful neighbor relations. Regardless of whether

Making it Work

Patience Prine-Carr, an FEI-level dressage trainer and United States Dressage Federation gold medalist who operates an Arabian training and breeding business on a 13-acre property in Monterey County, California, shares her tips from nearly two decades of successful small-acreage horsekeeping:

- “I believe in turnout,” she says. “Most of our property is pasture. We have six pastures for turnout: one 5-acre pasture for broodmares and five quarter-acre pastures for show horses.”
- Prine-Carr turns to seeding and irrigation for maximum grass growth throughout the property. Her farm is on a well, and recently switching to solar energy has reduced the cost of watering to about a third of what it had been previously.
- Alleys separate each pasture to minimize wear and tear along the farm’s wood fencing, as well as allow for stallion turnout and reduce horses’ injury risk. Prine-Carr says she did not install runs off stalls to avoid the winter mud and summer dust they tend to generate in her climate.
- From March to December, Prine-Carr supplements her horses’ diets with a feed-through fly preventive that works by disrupting the larvae maturation cycle in manure. “We’ve seen a huge difference in the number of flies,” she says.—*Natalie DeFee Mendik, MA*

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those nearby are horse owners, shielding your manure pile from view is a simple gesture with a big impact. Wickens recommends containing manure with a wall that prevents viewing from the neighboring property, stored as far as possible from adjoining property lines. Also consider employing aesthetic barriers, such as shrubbery.

“Be considerate of your neighbors,” Hoopes says. “Educate them about horses. Establish a good relationship before a problem exists.”

Carry Insurance

No one wants to think about a potential accident or legal troubles, but planning for incidents in which you could be held liable is part of horse ownership. Based on your situation and activities, consider carrying personal equine liability, an umbrella policy, farm and ranch coverage, and/or commercial equine coverage. Consult an agent specializing in the equine industry to evaluate your insurance needs.

Equine liability statutes vary by state, says Wickens. In states with protections against equine liability on the books, you can purchase signs to hang on your property outlining your limited liability. Even if your state does not have equine liability statutes, you can post signage warning of the inherent risk of equine activity. These signs are generally available from your state’s equine council.

Be aware that horses might be considered an ‘attractive nuisance,’ meaning you could be held liable if a minor is drawn to your property by something alluring (in this case, horses) and gets injured. Wickens suggests installing a secure perimeter fence around your property to help avoid such instances. You might also hang no trespassing signs.

“The more we have these ranchettes in close proximity to the general public, there is a greater need to be protected against liability,” says Wickens, who recommends consulting an equine lawyer about your individual situation.

Turn to Trusted Sources

For questions regarding managing small horse properties, Wickens recommends first reaching out to equine and livestock extension agents at the county and state level, as well as equine exten-



On most small acreages you won't have any grass growth if you keep horses on pasture year-round. Instead, split their time between fields and drylots and practice rotational grazing.

sion specialists at your state university and state Department of Agriculture. University extension websites also offer a wealth of information about small-acreage horsekeeping.

Educate yourself and make an effort to follow best practices. “Even if there is not a statute or regulation, there is the expectation to be good stewards of the land and considerate of neighbors,” Wickens says. ♣



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