

On the Fence

When choosing a fence type for your horse property, keep safety, maintenance, and aesthetics in mind

Never take farm fencing projects lightly. You'll likely have to live with the resulting paddocks and pastures for years to come, and that can be frustrating and inconvenient if you're unhappy with their appearance or practicality.

When I moved from Northern Illinois to the Kentucky Bluegrass, for instance, I constructed my paddocks as I would have in Illinois, and they ended up being much too large. Because the grass production in Kentucky is greater, the expansive fields put my horses at risk of founder, and I ultimately had to subdivide them. The differences in fence and paddock types are even more significant in the arid West or the wet Southeast—indeed, one factor to consider when you're planning fencing is geography.

Other fencing decisions are universal, depending on the type of operation. Most professional horse farms separate paddocks with double fence rows so horses can't fraternize over fencelines. Corners are radiused (rounded) to avoid inside traps and outside sharp projections.

You'll also want to consider gates and their locations, which can either ease or complicate daily chores and might be difficult to change, depending on the fence type. Designate larger gates for clear access for mowing and feeding equipment, and smaller gates for leading animals to and from the barn. Mount gates high enough to avoid dragging the ground after they inevitably settle and sag.

The most important decision you make, however, will probably be fence type, which will vary depending on where you live and what breed of horse you have. For instance, fences that are safe for ranch-style Quarter Horses might not be appropriate for hot-blooded racing Thoroughbreds.

"There is no perfect fence," says



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The classic four-board wood fence is safe and aesthetically appealing but requires occasional repainting and repair.

Frank Taylor, vice president of boarding operations and co-owner of Taylor Made Farm and Sales Agency, in Lexington, Kentucky. He's responsible for managing 1,500 acres of horse paddocks with more than 100 miles of fence, containing approximately 600 Thoroughbred stallions, mares, and foals.

"When this farm was started years ago," he says, "we installed wood four-board fence because of the combination of safety, price, and beauty. However, it requires a lot of expensive maintenance and chewing is a constant problem.

"We have installed a single strand of electric inside the upper edge of the top rail of our wood fence, which has helped with leaning and chewing," he adds.

Consider the above factors and adapt this information to your operation, terrain, and type of horses as you read on.

Four-Board Wood

This is the classic horse fence seen in America, England, and other parts of the world. Here in Central Kentucky, with our many Thoroughbred and Standardbred horse farms, it has been the fence of choice for more than a hundred years. It is a proven barrier that contains fractious racehorses and valuable breeding stock.

It consists of treated wood posts, usually 8 inches in diameter, placed 8 feet on center. The posts are 8 feet long, with approximately 3 ½ feet of that below ground. Rough-sawn 1-by-6-inch oak boards 16 feet long are then spaced equally with the joints staggered for strength and nailed to the inside of the post. By staggering the boards and placing them on the inside, you create a very strong and somewhat flexible barrier. Many property owners paint these fences black

because it requires less frequent repainting than traditional white boards.

Because you can bend green oak plank and aren't stretching wire on this fence type, you can create gradual curves on the inside corners of paddocks. Repairing this fence type is relatively easy.

Safety Very safe, as long as you maintain and replace the boards as needed. Splinters from decaying boards can be an issue. "The biggest problem I have seen with board fence is injuries from splinters, ranging from lethal pokes to 3-foot-long spikes along (horses') flanks," says Eric Peterson, DVM, of Equine Medical Associates, in Lexington, Kentucky. "It is very important to use decent-quality boards and replace any that are deteriorating.

"I have seen horrific accidents from all kinds of fence," he adds. "There is no perfect solution."

You also risk a rolling horse getting cast (legs caught) under the bottom rail, but this is rare.

Initial cost Moderately high. Remember to include painting in your estimates.

Long-term maintenance cost The biggest maintenance issue with this fence is that you need to paint it every two to three years and replace damaged or decayed boards. Fortunately, if a storm lays a tree on the fence, it will only damage limited sections. Most farms keep a small inventory of spare boards for these kinds of repairs. Modifications, such as adding or removing gates, are fairly simple, too.

If maintained properly, these fences typically last 20 to 25 years before posts decay to the point that it is time to start over.

Aesthetic appeal Excellent. Installing this kind of fence can change a farm's entire look. Because of its initial and long-term cost this kind of fence is used almost exclusively for horses versus other livestock.

Diamond- or V-Mesh Wire

Diamond-mesh and V-mesh are woven wire fence systems developed specifically for horses. Like four-board fences, they consist of treated wood posts set on 8-foot centers. A 1-by-6-inch oak rail usually protects the top of the wire fence and creates a strong visual barrier. Some property owners set the fence off the ground enough to allow string trimmers to get underneath.

As with all wire fence that relies on tension to prevent sagging, it can be difficult to create curves and radiused corners because the tension pulls posts in over time. A top rail can help hold the posts vertical, acting as a brace, but it might be insufficient for tight curves.

Safety Excellent. This fence is very strong and somewhat flexible, without the risk of breakage. The tight mesh prevents hooves, including foal feet, from going through the fence. If it is set no more than 6 inches off the ground, the chances of a rolling horse getting cast are minimal.

Initial cost High. Good-quality woven diamond or V-mesh is among the most expensive wire fencing types available.

Long-term maintenance cost Medium/low. Good-quality mesh is galvanized and strong enough to withstand most impact without damage. The posts and top rail (if used) will require periodic painting. One downside of all wire fence, except high-tensile, however, is if a tree falls on it, the wire stretches very little, potentially pulling down or breaking a long length of fence. It can be difficult to repair small sections because long runs might need to be restretched after repair. Also, trimming weeds under wire fencing is always more difficult than trimming under the bottom board of a wood fence.

Aesthetic appeal This type of fence with a top rail is very appealing, especially to experienced horse people who appreciate its safety and the investment made. Like four-board fence, it typically identifies the property as a horse farm.

"We like V-mesh fence, but it would change the look of the farm dramatically," notes Taylor.

High-Tensile in a Polymer Rail

This fencing type is designed to provide the strength and flexibility of high-tensile fence, with a polymer sheathing or band that creates the look of board fencing and protects the horse from injury. This system's flexibility and strength is



Many horse people appreciate the high quality and safety of V-mesh wire fencing with a top rail.

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unsurpassed if installed correctly on wood posts. You can also use vinyl posts if you monitor them for ultraviolet-ray degradation over time that can make them brittle and dangerous when they break.

Like all high-tensile fence wire, the key to installation is proper tension: It must be higher than that of traditional wire fence. You must install larger corner posts and gate posts that are well-braced—typically with a second post—to withstand the constant tension, even when the ground is soft in the spring or after heavy rains. I've noticed this type of fence is gaining popularity in horse country.

Safety Excellent. The high-tensile wire offers both strength and flexibility, surviving horse and hoof impact without entangling the animal. Again, wood posts are a proven support system.

Initial cost High. "The initial cost is almost 50% higher (than four-board wood) but we think may be more than offset by the lower maintenance cost," says Taylor. "If a tree falls on the fence the rails tend to stretch instead of breaking, making repairs a simple matter of retensioning. We have installed a test paddock to evaluate this system and may be moving in that direction over time."

Long-term maintenance cost Low. This system eliminates the constant maintenance and painting of wood rails. However, you will need to repaint wood posts periodically to maintain their appearance. If you purchase white polymer rail, you might need to power-wash it every few years.

Aesthetic appeal Excellent. From a distance this fence looks like well-maintained traditional wood plank fencing.

Wire Field

This is the traditional woven wire fence farmers use to contain a variety of livestock. Typically, the horizontal wires are spaced closer at the bottom for smaller animals. However, this fence is sometimes installed upside down for horse applications—the theory being that if an animal gets its foot through, it will have a better chance of extricating it without injury. It might also include a wood top rail for horse pastures.

I have seen this system used on many small pleasure horse operations and even



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High-tensile fencing in a polymer rail is designed to provide strength and flexibility, while giving the appearance of board fencing.

a few Thoroughbred farms. If using a top rail, wood posts must be on 8-foot centers. Some farm owners, especially those with cattle in the Midwest, alternate wood posts with steel T-posts or use all T-posts, except at corners, and a single strand of barbed wire on top. However, T-posts are not recommended for horse fence due to the sharp tops that can cause injury; the plastic caps available for these posts are not a long-term solution. And, generally speaking, barbed wire is inappropriate for horses.

As with all wire, installation involves stretching to avoid sags and installing properly braced corner and gate posts.

Safety Marginal, depending on how it's installed. Avoid steel T-posts and barbed wire.

Initial cost Moderate.

Long-term maintenance cost Low.

Because it does not look like traditional horse fence, treated posts can be left unpainted. If impact damages the fence, repair involves restretching the fence after replacing the damaged portion.

Aesthetic appeal It looks like farm fence, not horse fence, although a wood top rail can improve its appearance.

High-Tensile Wire

By itself, multistrand high-tensile fence is inappropriate for horses. It is difficult to see, and a panicked horse can be seriously injured if he runs into it. However, I have used this type of fence as an internal paddock divider when combined with a band of mesh high-tensile tape at the top to create a visual barrier and had no problems. I used wood posts on 30-foot



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Add a band of tape to the top of high-tensile fencing to make it safer for use with horses.

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centers with heavily braced posts on each end. I would not suggest using this fence with fractious or hot-blooded horses.

Safety Poor without a visual barrier, such as high-tensile tape, across the top.

Initial cost Moderately low.

Long-term maintenance cost Low.

Aesthetic appeal It doesn't look like horse fence.

Other Options

Steel pipe fencing This is a very safe type of fence used primarily in arid regions out West where rust is less of a problem. It is expensive but extremely strong and is sometimes used on farms where strength matters, such as in bull pens. Because it involves welding of joints, it is rarely installed by amateurs.

PVC post and rail This type of fence is designed to mimic four-board wood fence without incurring the long-term maintenance cost of repairing and painting. When installed properly it looks very neat and attractive. The problem that has developed in many places is the UV degradation, along with normal PVC outgassing, compromises strength over time and, when damaged, the material can shatter, leaving dangerously sharp edges. PVC fence's popularity on horse farms seems to have waned due to safety concerns.

Barbed wire Again, this fence material, while low-cost and -maintenance, is not safe for horses. It's also unattractive on horse farms.

Electric As a standalone system, electric fence is generally an inappropriate permanent containment system for horses. It is usually installed with temporary posts and often subject to damage from wildlife

and storms. High-visibility electric tape can be useful as a temporary paddock divider that allows escape without disaster. Poly wire and mesh tape are commonly used electric fence alternatives to solid wire. They incorporate fine strands of conductive wire and will break before seriously injuring a panicked horse.

Take-Home Message

Choosing a fencing type is one of the most important and expensive horse management decisions you will make. Find reputable fence contractors in your area, and ask for options and pricing for installed systems, even if you are planning to build yourself. Fencing material suppliers or farm stores are typically better sources for components than big box building supply stores. Finally, remember to choose something you will enjoy looking at for years to come. 🐾

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