

# What's on Your Barn Wish List?

Safety, health, and convenience features today's horse owners value, and what they cost

A barn is a luxury we construct to house, feed, and help meet our horses' basic needs and our desires. It can be as modest as a pole barn with temporary stalls, or as extravagant as a horse chateau with climate control and automatic everything. If economics were not a factor, what indulgences would you choose to enhance your horse's stabling experience and add a level of safety and convenience?

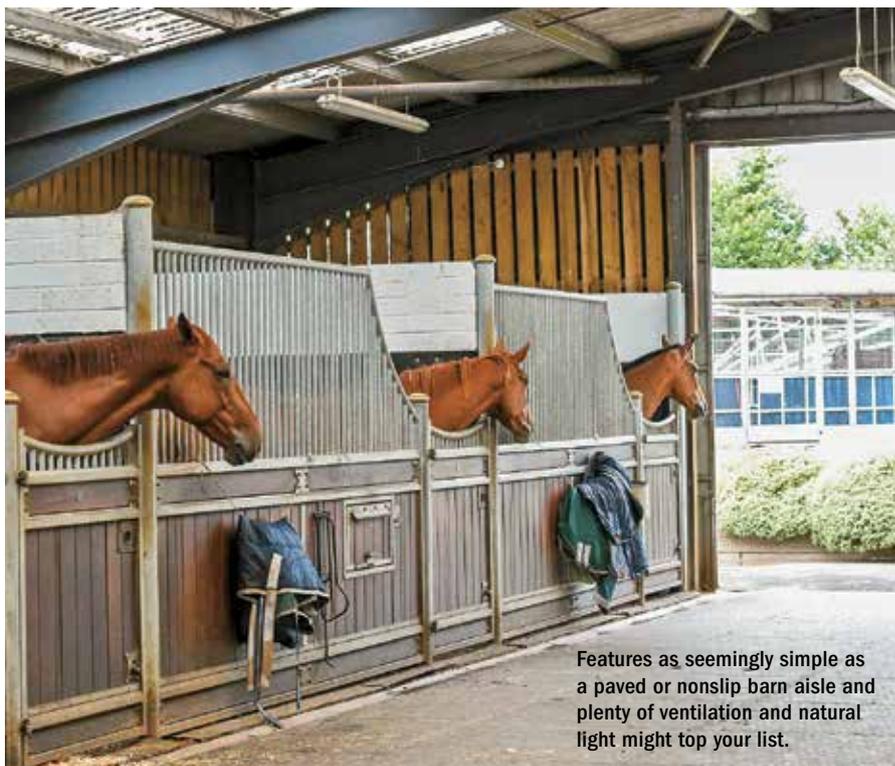
Here are some amenities real owners have put on their barn wish lists, plus my input as a horse owner with more than 30 years in the commercial and equine construction industries.

## Horse Health and Safety Enhancements

### **Plenty of ventilation and natural light.**

If your barn is not well-ventilated, this should be at the top of your list for renovations. Poor ventilation can lead to respiratory issues such as equine asthma (formerly known as heaves). You can improve it by including windows, ridge vents, roof vents, soffit vents, and fans in your barn design. As a general rule, your facility should have constant natural air movement without it blowing directly on the horses. There should be intake openings low and high for exhausting damp air. Depending on your barn's construction, the cost of installing these will vary from a few hundred to several thousand dollars.

You can gain natural light either through windows or skylights or both. Retrofitting these items can be costly, again depending on the type of wall or roof construction involved. Basic translucent roof panels are the least expensive option at approximately \$50 each plus labor. More substantial skylights can cost thousands each, with the most expensive



types featuring motorized open-and-close capabilities to help with ventilation.

Place windows for ventilation high enough in the wall to prevent horses from damaging them, or install protective bars or mesh (which can make cleaning difficult). Even with protection, barn windows for natural light should be constructed with tempered glass. Like skylights, the cost of windows varies, but the labor to install is the more significant item.

**Wireless cameras to monitor horses and security.** The cost of wireless devices has plummeted in the last few years. The biggest hurdle might be the distance from the barn to the house where you monitor the camera. Wi-Fi installed in the barn can mitigate this, or you can

buy long-distance transmitters for some systems. Surveillance systems marketed specifically for barns tend to have more rugged cameras designed for outdoor use and run \$500 to \$2,000, depending on the number of cameras and the size of the transmitter.

**Stall dividers that allow horses to see each other.** Open-style stall dividers allow horses to socialize and enjoy more air flow.

“For individually stalled horses, open-style dividers provide continuous opportunity to communicate with neighbors through sight, sound, and smell,” says Robin Foster, PhD, CAAB, research professor at the University of Puget Sound and affiliate professor at the University of Washington. “Even when

SALLY NEWCOMB

physical contact is limited, the social experiences using other senses are enriching and have physical and behavioral benefits, including lower stress, fewer stereotypic behaviors—such as cribbing and weaving—and greater compliance when handled. More communication with other horses also creates opportunities for social learning.”

Grill-top dividers, which come in single units and kits, are ideal for this purpose and are one of the safest types. As with most top-of-the-line options, however, they are pricey, with some running well over \$1,000 per divider. Livestock panels are affordable alternatives. These are made of heavy welded steel, are available in a variety of sizes and heights, and are strong enough to stay in place and resist minor impact.

**Vibration therapy plate.** If I had to choose the ultimate addition to a barn that would benefit both horse and rider, it would be a vibration mat/platform. Whole vibration therapy is believed to increase blood flow to tissues, and owners and veterinarians use it to help rehab injuries, maintain horses’ fitness, promote blood flow, and improve strength post-surgery ([TheHorse.com/18900](http://TheHorse.com/18900), [TheHorse.com/195](http://TheHorse.com/195)). The units are expensive—upward of \$6,000—and require professional installation.

## Chore-Time Conveniences

**Heated and/or automatic waterers in stalls.** Hauling water buckets to stalls is physically demanding. Automatic heated waterers are something most of us dream of but never own because, depending on the climate, the entire system must be heated to prevent freezing. The upfront cost, depending on system and electrical service, is around \$1,000 to \$3,000 per stall. Additionally, utility costs rise substantially with these systems in use.

**A horse vacuum.** A backpack or stand-alone vacuum can be indispensable for cleaning dust and dried mud from horses and dirt and debris from tack rooms. Most horses adapt to it quickly and even seem to enjoy the massage effect. There are several on the market for household use, which we have found to be the most economical and lightweight. Prices range from \$75 to \$200. Larger industrial types can cost up to \$600 or more.

**Stall-waste composting bays.** Tired of



ALEXANDRA BECKETT/THE HORSE

Open-style stall dividers allow horses natural socialization as well as improved air flow and visibility.

that pile of manure behind the barn? Stall waste is actually a valuable commodity that you can leverage.

“The benefits of composting horse manure are many and include reducing the possibility of parasite reinfection in your horse, reducing odors, reducing the volume of material you have piled up, and providing you with a valuable soil amendment for your pastures, garden, or yard.” says Alayne Blickle, director of Horses for Clean Water, in Nampa, Idaho.

Locate a composting area or bay far enough away from the barn to avoid odor, heat buildup, and insect problems but close enough to access easily with a loaded wheelbarrow or muck cart. It should also be accessible with a pickup truck or loader tractor. You will need to turn the pile occasionally, and it should have good air circulation and moisture for aerobic decomposition. The location must be well-drained and not allow runoff into adjacent streams or gullies. Walls can be constructed of wood or concrete, but these are primarily for aesthetic purposes. A floor slab of concrete and low walls can make turning and removing compost with a loader tractor more convenient, but it is not essential. The cost can be minimal or it can run several thousand dollars for a concrete containment system.

**Attached paddocks or runs that connect to the stalls for chore efficiency and turnout safety.** Paddocks that attach directly to

the barn can reduce time spent leading horses to and from turnout.

“This chore-efficient arrangement gives the horse free access to the stall, plus you have a clean, dry, convenient place to feed,” says Blickle. “Keeping horses separate also helps monitor their eating, water consumption, and defecating.”

At our farm, we have a run-in area in the corner of the barn with access to paddocks. We let horses in from the run-in directly to the barn aisle and their stalls. This eliminates chasing them around to bring them in to feed every day. Paddocks attached to each stall are a luxurious alternative but might not provide enough mental and physical benefit as full turnout.

**Paved barn aisle.** My first dream amenity was a paved barn aisle. I had built and remodeled a few barns for my own use, and the budget always seemed to run out before getting to the aisle. Once I had the resources to pave it with exposed aggregate nonslip concrete, it was like a different barn in terms of dust and general cleanup. Other options include coarse asphalt and rubber pavers. In any case, make sure the surface is nonslip. It will cost about \$8 to \$20 per square foot.

**Stall mats.** Rubber mats provide an easily cleanable base for stalls, making mucking easier and reducing bedding needs. These typically cost a couple hundred dollars per stall, whereas mattress-

style mats designed to provide horses with more comfort run well over \$1,000.

**Cross-tie bays.** A safe area in which to tie horses outside their stall for cleaning, tacking, and vet and farrier visits is more necessity than luxury. A bay equipped with cross-ties is ideal but involves space the size of another stall. Most of us find cross-ties in the aisle to be acceptable. You can affix these to the barn aisle in several ways. Blocker tie rings provide a safe system, allowing you to adjust the tie rope to regulate the amount of hold. This safety system is simple to install for approximately \$30 each side. They are also useful as single tie points instead of attaching directly to a barn support post.

**Washer and dryer in the tack room for cleaning blankets, pads, and towels.** A real luxury for most of us, a dedicated washer and dryer is not only convenient but also saves wear and tear on our home appliances. This option only makes sense if you already have a heated tack room with water and a drain nearby. If so, the

plumbing rough-in should be about \$500. If these services are not nearby, the cost could be prohibitive. A dryer is not as necessary because you can hang cleaned items to dry.

**Human Comforts**

**Climate-controlled tack/feed room.** Adding heating and, perhaps, cooling in your tack and/or feed room not only improves comfort but also helps prevent leather and metal from degrading as quickly over time. Salves, shampoos, and other liquids remain usable; feed won't spoil as quickly; and you'll have a warm or cool place to hang out in the barn. There are several possible approaches to this amenity.

First, the room must have some level of insulation, such as weather-stripping and thresholds. Tack rooms are often constructed to allow ventilation to help prevent mold from growing on leather items. You need to be able to close the ventilation during heating or cooling.

The simplest and least expensive



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A truly luxurious barn might include an indoor wash rack with warm water and a heat lamp.

heating option is a basic space heater. However, this is a major cause of barn fires when unattended or placed near flammable materials. Additionally, they might be plugged into circuits that are unable to handle the additional load.

Baseboard-type electric heaters installed by electricians are much safer options. The cost ranges from less than \$50 for a thermostatically controlled space heater to \$500 for a baseboard heater with a dedicated circuit.

The next step up would be an exterior wall-mounted heating and cooling unit. These look like window air conditioners and function the same in cooling mode. In heating mode an internal heat strip creates warmth. Again, you need to identify a circuit that can handle the load. If a window does not exist in the tack room, you will need to penetrate a wall. Cost for the appliance is \$300 to \$600 and might require professional installation.

The ultimate solution for a small space like a tack or feed room is a small HVAC system often referred to as a minisplit system. These work like miniature heat pumps with an inside and outside component. They are very energy-efficient but do require professional installation. Installed cost ranges from \$2,000 to \$4,000.

**Touchpad combination door hardware on tack room.** Somehow, and no matter how many copies we start with, we constantly misplace our tack room key. This amenity is one of the most practical and least expensive on this list. It generally does not require professional installation and



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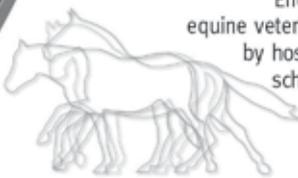
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**Detached hay storage.** Safe hay storage cannot be overemphasized, and a detached shelter is the best way to accomplish this. Unfortunately, you might be sacrificing convenience for peace of mind. A hay shed can be a simple structure that can serve several storage purposes. The type of structure depends on the aesthetics appropriate for your operation but should have large doors and easy access for trucks or wagons hauling hay, as well as reasonable access to the barn for daily chores. Cost will range from \$2,000 to \$20,000, depending on size and style.

**Heated bathroom.** Haven't we all wished for this more than once? Unfortunately, it is not a simple amenity to add. A dedicated insulated and heated room is required. In addition to all the obvious plumbing issues, you need a legal septic system for waste. Typically, the barn is too far from the residential septic system or sewer

line, so you must have a dedicated one installed. Starting from scratch, the cost will run upward of \$10,000, depending on construction type and level of finishes.

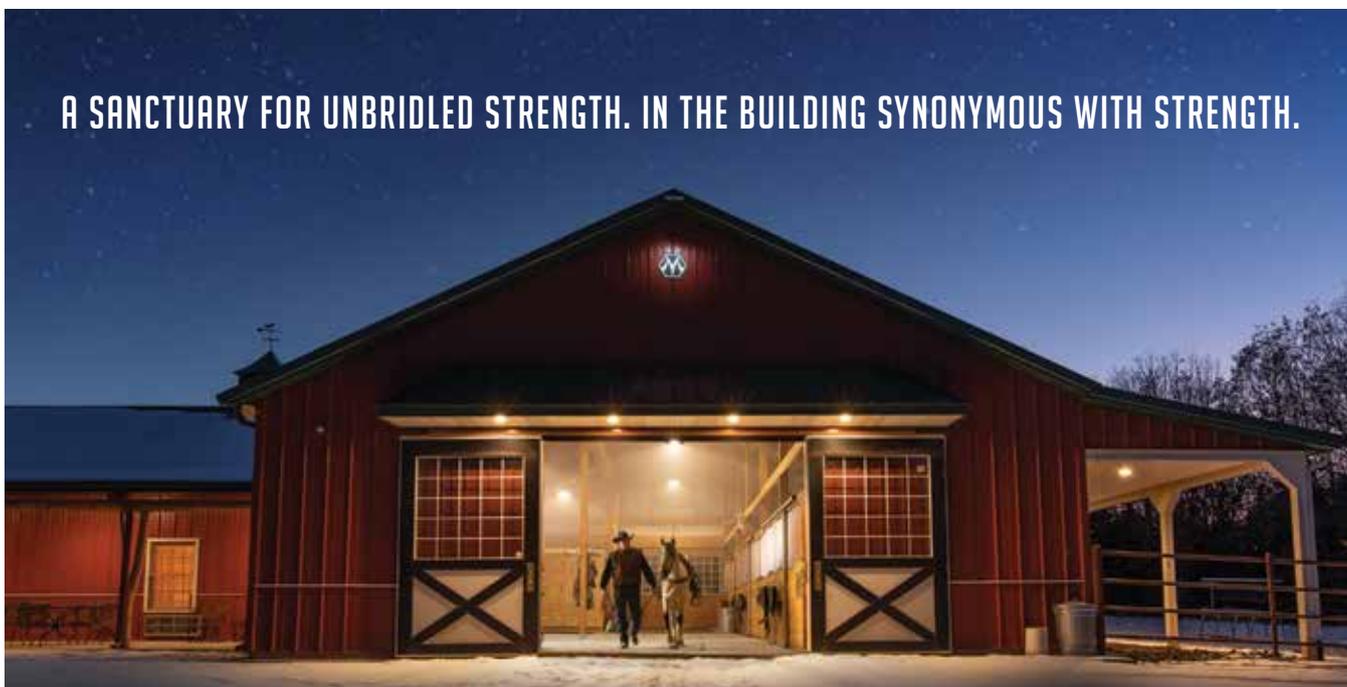
**Indoor wash rack with warm water and a safe heat lamp.** An indoor wash stall with heat is a true luxury, particularly when your horses are so crusted in mud when you bring them in that they look like armadillos. Of course, the wash stall needs to be enclosed on three sides and a concrete floor with drain designed to handle mud and hair without clogging. Heat lamps or fan-forced heaters placed up high can create warmth. In either case they must be designed for wet applications. Wash stalls are often placed next to tack rooms or heated bathrooms to concentrate plumbing and hot water heaters. These are expensive structures to install, ranging in cost from \$5,000 to \$10,000, not including a septic system if required.

**Wi-Fi.** Most of us can get online with our smartphones, but a true server is useful if you have a camera security system

that needs it or for general computer or business use. Depending on the distance from your home Wi-Fi, you might be able to use an extender to provide service in the barn. A high-quality extender should cost less than \$200. However, if the barn is more than 100 feet away, this might be difficult. Dedicated internet service to the barn will require a separate account with your provider and will probably involve pulling in a wire to the barn, unless you use a cellular or satellite service.

**Take-Home Message**

Your list of desired barn amenities is surely different than mine. Maybe a safe and well-lit set of cross-ties is all you need to complete a setup in which your horses spend most of their time turned out. Or, perhaps you're looking to splurge on a heated tack/feed room and bathroom combo. Whatever your horse health, chore efficiency, and creature comfort priorities, these are merely suggestions to spark your imagination. 🐾



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