



horse (left) courtesy Cassandra Burgess

KID-FRIENDLY HORSE FARM

It's been years since I've given any of my attention to anything horse. When I worked for the Forest Service, I packed with horses (and mules and burros), but in many ways, I'm just starting out. We've had several requests for more back story regarding our front covers. Those requests always make us chuckle and say things like, "If they only knew." So here goes. I stayed up late on a Saturday night, putting the finishing touches on my LOUD, but playful, leather chaps (my every cowgirl fantasy finally realized). The next day, Denali and Carol showed up to hopefully get a front cover shot. (We were down to the wire on deadline.) Carol, my magazine designer, who grew up with horses and was once a rodeo queen and trick rider, bridled up my horse, LB (Lightning Bolt), who I acquired after riding her on a pack trip into the backcountry. Denali worked the camera (her family also has horses), and that's when the fun began. As we were discussing where to take the photo so Carol would have a good backdrop for text, my other two horses starting acting up, wanting in on the action, which caused LB to act up too. So we had to do extra horse wrangling we didn't plan on ... "Is my hair still okay?" Oprah was on her front cover, saddled up, in July 2002, and she said it was the hardest cover she ever shot. We discovered likewise. A horse presents lots of variables that are difficult to control (ears forward, eyes alert, etc.) but in the end, we prevailed, somewhat. MaryJane riding off into the sunset? Nah, we just couldn't pull it off.

“ The mare and her foal inhabit the same tent with the Bedouin and his children. The neck of the mare is often the pillow of the rider, and, more frequently, of the children, who are rolling about upon her and the foal; yet no accident ever occurs, and the animal acquires that friendship and love for man which occasional ill-treatment will not cause him for a moment to forget. ” – William Youatt, 1831

To turn my farm into a more kid-friendly horse farm (along with everything else), I consulted with Alayne Blickle. She has an impressive traveling program she offers on how to include children in the care of horses, but also how to raise horses AND have clean watersheds. Improperly managed livestock is notorious for fouling waterways, and Alayne has set out to do something about it with her award-winning program, Horses for Clean Water (www.facebook.com/HorsesForCleanWater).

On the next two pages, Alayne and her friend, Karina Sogge, share their ideas for child-appropriate farm tasks and child-friendly farm designs, as well as one of their activity lessons that teach children the importance of snags. I loved their advice, and immediately found willing subjects to incorporate their methods. I also bought my older granddaughter a riding helmet and enrolled her in a riding class taught by a local woman who offers lessons specifically designed for children, even the very youngest, on how to ride safely (www.firstrides.com).

“ Often times, we teach kids about riding without introducing them to the responsibilities that come with the privilege. Other times, it's a struggle deciding how to scale things down to a young person's level or figure out what horse-safe chores we can include small children in. ”

– Alayne Blickle, life-long equestrian, reining competitor, and creator of Horses for Clean Water



background©iStockphoto.com/Zack Blanton | little girl and horse (top right)©iStockphoto.com/Kevin Klöpfer

THE IMPORTANCE OF SNAGS



Snags, or dead trees that are still standing, are important to lots of wildlife. Birds like woodpeckers and chickadees can find lots of insects to eat in snags. The holes in snags also provide birds like owls, nuthatches, swallows, and wrens a place where they can escape bad weather, build nests, and raise their young. Creatures like salamanders, tree frogs, and bats find shelter under the loose bark of snags. Snakes sometimes hide in tree cavities, and many other animals use these spaces to store food. Snags also provide a great place for birds like eagles, hawks, and owls to perch while they are hunting for mice and other rodents on the ground that are the bane of a horse farm. Birds can see their prey more clearly from a snag than from a live tree because a snag doesn't have any leaves.

If you have a snag on your farm and it's not anywhere that might be a safety hazard, ask your parents to leave it in place instead of cutting it down.

ACTIVITY: WILDLIFE FILL-IN

1. Some birds find _ _ _ _ _ to eat in snags.
2. Birds like eagles, hawks, and owls like to perch on snags when they are _ _ _ _ _ .
3. The loose _ _ _ _ of snags can provide shelter for salamanders and tree frogs.



Big and little tools help a child feel included.



Start your children's interest in horses at an early age with toy horses.

“ My children are 10, 7, and 3½ years old. I try to incorporate them as much as possible out in the barn. Even when they were in strollers, they came out to the barn with Momma. I make it a practice to carry on conversations with them, and did so even before they were talkers. With children, it's mostly about the process, not so much the 'product,' of chore completion. That comes in time. I praise any accomplishment, thank them for their help, smile, and tell them how lucky I am to have their assistance. There are many things children can do in and around the barn, with or without an adult, depending on their ages. It takes more time and patience to include them, especially in the beginning, but as they get older, they get used to helping. The payoff will be down the road—when you really need their help, it will be natural for them to pitch in. ”

– Karina Sogge, avid equestrian and former rodeo queen



CHILD-FRIENDLY FARM DESIGNS:

- Make gates so they open one-handed to allow you to hold the hand of a young child at the same time (or lead a horse or carry an armful of tack or a cup of coffee).
- Create a pass-through by leaving a post-space

width (approximately 2') from a gate entrance or paddock corner so kids can get in and out easily. (I call this a “secret” passageway to encourage my children to use it.)

- Create walkways to and from the barn that don't pass through livestock areas.
- Invest in child-sized equipment so kids can help, such as mini manure forks, small muck buckets, or manure carts a child can pull or use with ease, and brushes kids can grip and scrub with.
- Locate your arena next to your barn or as close to your paddocks as possible. That way, kids can play in the arena while you do chores and you can keep an eye on them. Kids LOVE playing in a giant sandbox!

little boy and horse (right)©iStockphoto.com, Don Bayley

CHILD-APPROPRIATE FARM TASKS:

- Pre-measure one-serving grain/supplement mixtures into containers (I reuse large yogurt containers). Later on, kids can feed animals without adults worrying about accurate proportions.
- Pre-measure portions of hay. Since feed requirements differ from horse to horse, I weigh my hay, then set the portions on empty grain sacks to make a clear distinction about what is to be fed.
- With a sturdy brush, a youngster can scrub water buckets as needed.
- Have a child watch while the water tub fills to let you know it's getting full and not overflowing (my 3½-year-old likes to do this—I clean paddocks or do other chores while he's watching the water).
- Have an older sibling teach a younger sibling how to use the manure fork to clean a paddock.
- Even a very young child can help by pointing out manure piles in the paddock while the adult is cleaning (my son has helped me with this since he was 2.)
- Have a child pick up rocks in the arena and put them in a bucket or pick up large rocks from soil removed from posthole diggings so you can use the dirt for other projects.
- To spread and harrow manure in pastures, have everyone get their paddock boots on and help kick manure piles in the pasture. This excellent low-tech way to harrow pastures is a fun family event for us.
- Children can carry veggie scraps from kitchen to compost pile. We learn that compost bugs love veggie scraps. Kids can sprinkle spent coffee grounds onto the compost pile. (Starbucks gives grounds away free for gardening.)
- Have kids look for worms as the compost gets turned. They love this, and it's a wonderful educational activity.

