7 Steps To Barn Success

Comfort and safety (the horse's, that is) should be top priorities when building a barn and a place to ride. Now that you finally have that place in the country, you can keep horses at home instead of boarding them somewhere else. As you design and build a barn and riding ring, be sure to put the needs of the animals first. You must understand the psyche of the horse to build the perfect barn, says George Engler, a dealer for California-based MD Barns. "You've got to think like the horse -- what it's going to take to make him safe, comfortable, and happy." Before you start building, look into zoning regulations, deed covenants, and governmental restrictions that may apply in your area. Ask local veterinarians, farriers, and feed/hay dealers for the names of horse owners with good facilities. Take pictures and notes, and find out what they liked and didn't like about the builder.

BARN BASICS

Horse barns can be framed in wood, metal, or masonry. With the exception of pole barns, they all require a continuous concrete foundation wall. The pole barn (a fast, economical type of construction) consists of pressure-treated wood posts set below the ground on concrete footings.

Metal barns have a galvanized steel framework that, when engineered properly, can carry heavier snow and wind loads than wood barns. A metal barn doesn't require regular painting, weatherproofing, and replacing of roof shingles and damaged stall walls, and it's easier to clean. Pressure-washing the inside of the stalls twice a year is usually sufficient.

FOLLOW THESE TO A BETTER BARN

1. Look for high ground. If possible, the barn should always be placed at the highest point on your property. The site should be well-drained and graded so water flows away from the building.
2. Fit the style to the site. Choose a barn that fits your site and geographic location. The shed-row (one or two rows of stalls with outside access covered by an overhang) is common in warmer climates. Traditional styles include the gambrel (a rounded roof seen on old dairy barns) and the classic gable roof. There is also a design with a raised centerline roof that can be built with a single or double aisle.
3. Keep fresh air circulating. Ventilation is critical because horses can develop respiratory problems without an adequate supply of fresh air. If the barn has a full loft, put a window in each stall for cross ventilation. Ridge and cave vents or cupolas are also helpful. Include doors at each end of the barn that can be left partly or completely open as weather permits. You can insulate the roof and walls to block cold drafts, but Engler advises against heating systems; they're expensive and unhealthy for the animals.
4. Cushion the floor. Dirt is the cheapest floor for a barn, but creates a lot of dust. Concrete is expensive, but permanent and easy to maintain. Another option is asphalt pavement, which is relatively soft and offers good traction. Use rubber mats, preferably 3/4 inch thick, in stalls and aisles to protect the horse's feet and legs.
5. Provide water and light. A barn needs both natural and artificial light to make it comfortable to work in. A convenient, dependable source of hot and cold water for drinking, bathing horses, cleaning stalls and tack, and washing blankets and other equine laundry is a must.
6. Minimize wear and tear. Horses roll, paw, and kick in their stalls. A metal barn discourages chewing and stands up to pounding; some manufacturers offer a lifetime kick-through warranty. However, metal stalls should be lined wit hard lumber to prevent injuries to the animals. The recommended stall size is 12x12 feet, with walls at least 7 feet high.
7. Don't risk a fire. A hayloft above stalls is convenient, but it's also a fire hazard. Consider storing hay in a separat building. Metal barns have an edge over wood barns in that they're fire-resistant.

WHAT'LL IT COST ME?

Barns vary widely in price depending on site conditions, material and labor costs and availability, and the complexity of the design, finishes, and features. You could conceivably spend from $5,000 for a small shed to $40,000 or more for a barn with all the extras.

According to Engler, an MD steel barn with four stalls, a tack room, and a feed room runs between $18,000 and

$28,000, not including site preparation, concrete work, electrical wiring, and plumbing (add 25% to 30% for the last two).

If you can't afford everything you want right now, build it in stages. Install the rough plumbing and electrical work and add the amenities later. Consider a modular barn, which is built in modules or sections that permit expansion as your budget allows. If you have a good working knowledge of construction, you can save 10% to 20% of the total cost by acting as general contractor. However, you must be extremely organized and ready to commit a lot of time to overseeing the project.

BUILDING AN ARENA

The size of a riding ring or arena depends on the type of riding you plan to do. For instance, 100x200 feet is good for pleasure riding. The arena fence should be at least 6 feet tall to discourage horses from putting their heads over the rail as they approach turns. Different types of fencing can be used, including wood, metal, and vinyl, as long as it's sturdy. The arena should be slightly higher in the center and slope gradually from one side to the other. Ditches may have to be installed for optimum drainage. Apply gravel to outdoor arenas to keep them from becoming slippery during the winter.

According to Wayne Gregory of Footings Unlimited, a manufacturer of arena additives headquartered in St. Louis, the cheapest approach is to clear off the top inch or two of native soil, till it, and put up a fence. However, most people are dissatisfied with the results. "It's always inconsistent," says Gregory. "You get puddles after a rain, and it's slick. Rocks come up, and grass and weeds keep growing in it."

A better solution is to grade the natural earth until it is level and compact, then put in a rock base such as limestone or decomposed granite. A penetrating or sealing-type oil is recommended, followed by a layer of hard, coarse sand, typically washed concrete sand. Various materials can be mixed in to extend the life of the sand, such as sawdust, wood chips, hardwood fiber, and granulated rubber (one popular additive is made from defective athletic shoes). These materials help the arena surface by reducing dust, improving drainage and traction, and changing depth.

TIPS ON ARENA FOOTINGS

The condition of the footing, or surface, of a riding ring or arena affects both horse and rider. If hoof prints aren't smoothed out, they can cause the horse to tilt to one side or the other, resulting in an uncomfortable ride. Over time, an uneven footing can damage a horse's feet.

The type of footing is determined by climate, whether the arena is indoors or outdoors, and the riding discipline. For example, dressage and pleasure horses work well on a resilient footing that isn't too deep, while cutting horses like a footing that is 4 to 5 inches deep.

Maintenance is the key to a good footing. Water your riding ring or arena to keep the dust down and drag it to keep the surface smooth and level. According to Wayne Gregory of Footings Unlimited, the rule of thumb for dragging is once a week if you own one horse, two or three times a week if you have three to five horses, and every two days if youown six or more horses.

The type of drag you choose is largely budget-driven, but ideally, you want something with teeth or tines and a blade that will pull the edges and corners out and level the surface. Good harrows aren't cheap (they cost roughly $2,000), but they do a thorough job and can be used for other purposes such as breaking up soil for planting a pasture or keeping the paths clean in an orchard or vineyard.

Learn more by calling a footing specialist at:
Footings Unlimited
Phone: 800/218-5172
www.footingsunlimited.com