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[www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk) E: [info@apbc.org.uk](mailto:info@apbc.org.uk)

# Enriching The Stable Environment For Your Horse

Anna Haines - Equine Behaviour Solutions

## Introduction

Horses are herd animals who are designed to live in a social group and travel many kilometres every day. They are trickle feeders who need to graze for up to 18 hours per day. When we stable horses, we take away their ability to do these things that they would naturally do, and that means that it is our responsibility to make the stable environment as suitable for them as possible. Of course in an ideal world, all the horses would live out in a field, 24 hours a day in a stable social group but with current management systems that we have in place in this country this is not always possible.

There are lots of different ways that you can improve the stable for your horse, and once your imagination starts the possibilities are endless! Some ways that you can improve the stable for your horse include:

- Ensure your horse has enough forage to last the whole night. Consider swapping to a lower quality feed (e.g. hay instead of haylage) so you can give more, or put two haynets around the hay to slow the eating. Provide haynets in numerous locations rather than just one.
- If you use haynets, try to use the variety with smaller holes, as this also lengthens the time that it will take for your horse to eat the contents. Be aware that if you use nets with very small holes, it can be difficult for the horse to get the hay out if it is packed very full. This can cause frustration and may cause more stress than it eliminates, so spend some time observing your horse eating from their net to ensure that they are not becoming frustrated.
- Provide a small net of feed quality straw too, so that your horse has the option of this more fibrous forage if they would like it.
- Visual contact with other horses is essential, but physical contact is preferable. Windows between stables allow horses to make contact with each other, or better still adopt a group housing system.
- Provide salt/mineral licks or make small frozen licks by pureeing vegetables and freezing them. There are also a number of recipes available on the internet to make your own salt blocks of varying flavours to add a little variety.
- If you have to feed concentrate, sprinkle it on the floor or a pile of hay rather than using a bucket OR split the ingredients into different buckets, so your horse can choose what to eat when. Remember that horses stomachs are designed to eat little and often, so avoid giving large concentrate feeds and instead feed little and often.
- Give your horse a selection of fruit and vegetables around their stable. These can be chopped into small pieces and sprinkled around on the floor, on top of any hay piles, stuffed into the haynets, and poked into any nooks and crannies where they will be able to pull them out from using their lips. This will encourage your horse to start investigating his/her stable and looking for different things to keep him/her occupied. You can also make holes through some vegetables/fruit and hang them up around the stable.
- Remember that you don't have to stick to only giving carrots! Horses enjoy a wide range of fruit and veg, and they each have their own preferences. Some examples of things that my own horses enjoy are: broccoli, green beans, pumpkin, squash, swede, turnip, parsnip, corn on the cob, raspberries, apples, pears, blackberries, bananas, melon. Yours will have their own preferences and if they have never had different items offered to them before they may take some time to



build up the confidence to try new things but once they realise how good they taste they will really enjoy the variety.

- Provide treat branches – simply find a branch from a non-poisonous variety of tree and place it in the stable. Each day stick something different onto its appendages, e.g. vegetables, dried fruit, polos, jam, etc.
- Provide logs/branches to chew/browse on (check first that they are safe for horses!). Horses enjoy nibbling the leaves from branches, as well as chewing off the bark. Always double check that the type of branches/logs are safe for horses before you provide them.
- Trial some herbs with your horse by placing a small amount on your hand and letting them taste them. Some herbs that horses seem to enjoy include: cherry, cumin, fenugreek, peppermint, oregano and rosemary, but again your horse will have their own preferences. If they enjoy some of the flavours, create little areas where you sprinkle these in small piles, so that your horse can lick them at their leisure.
- Provide forage based 'brix' for them to chew on. These are available from feed companies such as Simple Systems and are made from compressed grasses to make a solid brick shaped edible object! They take the horse a little time to chew through, and can be particularly useful for horses who have a tendency to crib bite as they provide something that they can bite against without causing themselves any damage.
- Give stable toys, e.g. treat balls, but watch your horse for signs of frustration. Treat balls can be a great way to provide your horse with some activity within the stable. Fill the treat ball with forage based pellets and avoid filling it with grains or molassed feed stuffs. When introducing the treat ball, you can help your horse to move it, so that they learn how it works. When providing toys like this, always watch them with it for a period of time before leaving them alone with it to ensure that they do not become frustrated. If they show signs of frustration, remove the toy and try introducing it gradually each day for a few minutes, whilst also helping them to use it.
- Provide a toy box for your horse, for supervised play at certain times of day but do not leave your horse unattended with the toy box. This can include a variety of toys such as rope or rubber dog toys, empty drinks cartons, empty yoghurt pots, old wellies, etc. Anything that might have an interesting smell or texture would be great to add into here. If you throw a handful of forage based pellets into the box it will encourage your horse to rummage around amongst the toys and give him an opportunity to engage in solitary play. Old wellies can be great if you cut the toes out and stuff them with hay or other goodies for your horse to pull out.
- Ensure you are not over-rugging. Just because you're cold, doesn't mean your horse is! Horses have fantastic internal central heating provided they have a plentiful supply



of hay. By having a constant supply of forage to eat, horses are able to generate and maintain their own body heat. If your horse is clipped, elderly or unwell then you may have to consider your rugging options more carefully, but if they are fit and healthy and have not been clipped, provided they have enough forage they should be able to maintain a good body temperature without any rugs. Remember that horses are capable of increasing their own body temperature with appropriate feeding, but they are not able to reduce their body temperature if they are over-rugged and this can become extremely uncomfortable and distressing for them (imagine yourself in a warm room, with a winter coat, hat, gloves and scarf on and not being allowed to take it off!).

Your imagination really is the only limit when it comes to enriching the stable environment for your horse. General rules for enrichment are to provide different things each day, so that the items don't become just another boring feature of their stable. Variety is the spice of life as they say, and this is the same for your horse! Animals are generally unlikely to play with toys that they have with them all the time, so by removing them each day and swapping them for a different object you can encourage your horse to continue investigating new things on a daily basis. Don't feel that you have to implement all of the above ideas all at the same time!

Most of these ideas can also be used when your horse is in the field, and can be particularly useful in the winter months when the grazing may become very limited. Remember that there is very little goodness in the grass in the winter time, so your horse will appreciate some additional nutrition and things to occupy him because he will not be able to spend as much time grazing as he would in the summer.

Enjoy trying these new things for your horse. I personally feel that there is nothing more satisfying than watching your horse enjoy investigating a new treat/toy of some kind that you have given them for that day, and watching them work out how best to use it. Have fun – your horse will thank you for it!

