

Automatic Care

We're all familiar with the conventional wisdom that says horses are healthier, and happier, when they're fed several small meals a day rather than just one or two larger meals. And we all know they need constant access to fresh, clean water. But the demands of traditional horsemanship aren't always so easy to fulfill in the 21st century. It can be nearly impossible to be at a horse's beck and call for feedings and waterings four, five, or six times a day.

Fear not. With the help of a few technological innovations, you can meet all of your obligations *and* make sure your hors-

Streamlining your operation couldn't be easier with the wide variety of automatic watering and feeding systems now available

es are well cared for. Just think: no more worries about rushing around to make sure you adhere to your feeding schedule. No need to panic about whether the trough has frozen over in your absence. No worries if you can get all the horses tended *and* meet that client for dinner. All

now can be done with the aid of a little automation.

AUTOMATIC FEEDERS

Automatic feeders for horses exist in all sorts of varieties. What they have in com-


ERIN RYDER

Automatic feeders and waterers can make life easier for busy horse owners

mon is a reservoir for feed, a power source that enables the device to dump feed into a bucket or bowl, and a timer you can set so the feed is delivered when you choose.

Some automatic feeders are designed to deliver only enough feed for a single day. Others can accommodate an entire 50-pound bag of grain and will distribute meals for a couple of weeks at a time before they need refilling. Some need a source of electricity; others run on batteries or even solar chargers. And most are designed to be outside.

Automatic feeders can deliver a horse's breakfast, lunch, and dinner at pre-set intervals and pre-set volumes. That's one of their main advantages: if you'd like your horse to have 12 small meals a day, rather than one or two large ones, you can simply program the unit, fill it with feed, and walk away.

Nutrition research has shown that horses—especially those kept in stalls most of the time—fed multiple small meals each day have better digestive and mental health. This feeding routine closely resembles a horse's natural grazing behavior.

Horses also tend to waste less feed because they only have a small amount to clean up each time. In fact, some makers of automatic feeders suggest you might have to cut back on the total amount of feed given per day because horses will gain weight more easily on a several-feeds-a-day program.

Then there's the convenience factor. Imagine not having to fret about whether

the horses have been fed when you're stuck in traffic on the way home from work or working late at the sale. In fact, with the horses fed early, those in-training or sale horses will be ready to go to work when you roll out of bed, saving you time and labor.

FEEDER DRAWBACKS

There are a few drawbacks to automatic feeders. First, most operate with a rotating auger system that can be clogged by sticky feeds that are heavy on the molasses, oil, or moisture. They tend to work



Using buckets for watering horses is labor intensive, as well as time-consuming

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better when you use un-molassed grains, pellets, or extruded "kibble" rather than sweet feeds, high-fat rations, or soaked beet pulp.

Second, if you're feeding supplements or medications, large-volume automatic feeders might not be the best way to ensure the dosages delivered in each feed are equal or appropriate.

Third, they can be pricey (depending on the model, automatic feeders can cost \$300 and up per stall).

Finally, they should never be relied on to entirely replace conscientious care of your horses. An automated feeder can't detect a brewing colic or correct itself when something jams up the works; your presence and your interaction with your horses are still essential parts of responsible horsemanship.

TIPS FOR SHOPPING

Here are some factors to consider when you're shopping for an automatic feed system:

- How is it constructed? Some feeders are stainless steel, others painted metal, still others plastic. How durable you need the unit to be will depend on whether it is installed inside the stall or paddock or outside it (i.e., how much direct contact it will have with your horses). You'll also want to ensure the feeder has no sharp edges or anything on which your animals could injure themselves. In this regard, plastic has the advantage, but it might not have the longevity of stainless steel.

- Is the unit rodent- and moisture-proof? Is it spill-proof, even when a persistent horse does his best to persuade it to cough up more feed?

- How much feed will it hold? Larger-volume units need to be filled less often, but there's always the potential for feed spoilage even when water and mice can't invade. They also take up more space and might be more difficult to install. Smaller units are convenient if you're only likely to be absent for part of a day, but won't do the job if you're away for longer periods.

- Is it designed to be mounted inside or outside the stall or paddock? Units that mount on the opposite side of the fence or wall from the horses take less of a beating, and they eliminate the necessity for being inside with the horse when you're filling them, which is safer and faster. But they might project into your barn aisle, taking up space and creating safety problems there.

- How easy or difficult is it to install? Will you have to hire a professional or can you do it yourself? Can it be installed



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Automatic waterers have numerous advantages

in an existing barn, or does it need to be incorporated into your design when you build?

- What kind of power source does the feeder need? Will you have to have an electrical outlet close by, and can you arrange electrical cords so they're not in range of equine teeth? Some units solve this problem by being battery-powered (one takes only a couple of "C" batteries and claims to run for up to a year on them) or running on solar chargers. Others are designed so several feeders can run from one power source. Units that run on batteries, or have battery back-up, eliminate the worry of power outages.

- What sort of feed delivery system does it use? Is there potential for the unit to jam, clog, or seize up? How easy is it to empty, clean, and service?

- Must your horses stay inside in order for you to take advantage of an automatic feeding system, or is the unit built to withstand weather? Remember that in a turn-out situation, you'll need to minimize the chance of squabbles over feed. In-

dividual paddocks or separate stalls in run-in sheds can solve this problem.

AUTOMATIC HAY

OK, so automated feeders dispense grain on command. But what about hay? A horse on good summer turnout might be able to rely on grass, but at many times of the year, and in many situations, he'll need hay as well. Is there such a thing as an automatic hay feeder?

Of course. Some units, like the Stable Grazer (www.stablegrazer.com) and MK Freetime Feeder (www.mkfreetimefeeder.com) can even dispense flakes of hay and grain, together or separately. The Stable Grazer (about \$2,500) can hold up to six flakes of hay, with optional grain envelopes, and it can be programmed to deliver it in as many as six feedings, while the Freetime Feeder (about \$400) dispenses hay and/or grain for a single pre-programmed feeding. There's also an automatic round-bale feeder for paddock use with multiple horses from www.nelsonmfg.com.

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ice-horse.com/hay.html. It's an adapted "tombstone" round-bale feeder with a PVC curtain that can be programmed to raise and lower at pre-set intervals to allow access to the hay within. The inventor of this feeder claims it cuts down on mess and hay wastage, and it saves considerable labor and time when feeding a large herd. Cost is about \$1,600.

AUTOMATIC WATERERS

Only a small percentage of North American horse farms use automatic feeders routinely, but automatic waterers, if you'll pardon the pun, are positively mainstream.

Devices that ensure a constant supply of fresh water in barns and paddocks are popular devices, and rightly so. Not only do they save hours of labor (who enjoys dragging a hose around?), they cut down on mess, don't provide a breeding environment for disease-carrying mosquitoes or potentially toxic algae the way troughs do, save natural waterways from erosion and contamination, and (if insulated and/or heated) make sure water stays available even during the frostiest winters.

WATERER DRAWBACKS

Like all automated devices, automatic waterers do have their downside, the most important of which is that it's difficult to monitor the amount of water your horses are drinking. At least one brand (Nelson) does have an optional meter that registers the amount of time a horse spends using the waterer, if not the actual volume consumed.

Waterers also have a reputation for



COURTESY HAYDAY

Both hay and grain can be dispensed by some types of automatic feeders

being somewhat cantankerous and prone to breaking down, overflowing, or freezing up at the most inconvenient time, although newer models are far more trouble-free than they were in the past. Despite these potential problems, automatic waterers can often be a godsend in terms of time and labor saved, especially for large operations.

SHOPPING TIPS

Automatic watering systems are available both for indoor and outdoor use. In either case, they need to stand up to considerable abuse. Horses will not only drink from them—they'll chew them, use them as scratching posts, and try to pull them from the wall or the floor if there's nothing else to entertain the horses. So look for rugged housings and systems that won't overflow even when they're treated as chew toys. Plumbing and shutoff valves should be positioned so they're out of reach of equine lips and teeth, and main water lines should be buried in order to keep them frost-free.

Older-style waterers with paddles that horses must depress with their noses in order to trigger the valve that fills the bowl with water are gradually being replaced by gravity-fed systems that require no learning curve from the animals.

Scott Torticill, director of sales for Nelson Manufacturing of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a major supplier of automatic watering systems for horses, said, "Both our 300 series waterers and the new 700 series have weight-activated valves. The 300 series is our original design, dating back to 1949.

Water fills the bowl at the top from the water line at the bottom. When the animal drinks, the water level goes down, which engages the valve so the bowl fills again. There is a series of three nested bowls which keep the water at the correct level. To clean it, you flip open the lid and remove the inner bowls.

"The 700 series is a bit of an upgrade, in that it has a balance-beam activated valve," he added. "Inside the unit is a cross-beam with a lead counterweight. When the animal drinks, the lead weight drops, which engages the valve and fills the bowl again. The advantage is there's just a single bowl instead of three, so it's easier to clean. And it has an individual shutoff valve that's accessible from the surface."

Different manufacturers have different water-flow systems for their waterers, so it's important to ask questions, compare, and decide what works best for your farm.

Regardless of the brand you buy, you'll probably need some professional help to install an indoor or outdoor automatic waterer. Water lines must be buried to the correct depth for your climate and soil conditions, drainage beds might need to be installed, and you will need expert advice on the best place to site the drinking bowl(s), especially if you choose heated models that require access to electricity.

Automatic watering systems do represent an investment in both equipment and labor. But to those who've taken the plunge, that initial investment pays off in long-term convenience, equine health, and peace of mind. 

TradeZone readers don't just represent a segment of the Thoroughbred market, they ARE the Thoroughbred market.

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