

Digestive herbs for horses

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1) Why use herbs for horses?

Horses are natural herbalists. Given the opportunity, horses will eat the herbs they need. It's unfortunate that so many pastures are monocultures of grasses only. Horses evolved, as we know, to roam long distances and eat a wide variety of plants including tree and shrub parts. For most of us, the best we can do is choose the right herbs for them. It's really important to let the horse lead when you are offering them herbs.

A horse may not initially like an herb, but give them a chance to slowly become accustomed and if the herb make them feel better they will start to love it. If the horse keeps refusing it, there is always an alternative herb. My horses run in from the pasture for their herbs and these are horses who get only about an hour of pasture per day because our pasture is so lush most of the year. Horses will also occasionally take a break from their herbs or when healing is complete, may stop eating particular herbs forever.

2) What are herbs?

Herbs are plants with healing and nutritive properties. Some are strong and you may only use them for a short time while others can be more nutritive which is not to say they are weak but they are great at supporting and healing the body in a more longterm manner.

Herbs can come from any part of the plant: root, stems, leaves, sap, blossoms and berries. The best herbs are harvested at the plant's peak of vitality and dried quickly and without excess heat.

3) Start with the digestive system

If we think about how neglect and abuse or any stress will affect the gut. Think of the most simple example of this, the horse who gets a loose stool every time he rides in the trailer. Dr. Stephen Duran taught a workshop for us about 10 years ago. He told us 65% of horses will get an ulcer within 3 days of any kind of travel and 93% of horses will have ulcers at least once during their lifetimes. And this statistic is only about the stomach. Think what's happening to the rest of the digestive tract.

Our modern methods of horse care aren't necessarily aligned with the normal functioning and health of the horse's gut. Add neglect and abuse to that equation and these horses often have ulcers, scarring, leaky gut, imbalanced microbiomes, chronic constipation or diarrhea and more. We can see the immediate effects in physical appearance, behavior, stool changes, movement

and cognition. Longterm effects can include all kinds of diseases, arthritis, lowered immunity, growth problems, early aging and more.

4) Goals for a digestive herb blend

A) Address gut pain. Almost all digestive issues cause some level of gut pain from mild gas to seriously painful ulcers and lack of motility.

B) Help heal the gut lining. Mucilaginous herbs help soothe and coat the gut lining. Most mucilaginous herbs have constituents which increase production and healing of skin cells, which help the gut start healing. Often you will see a difference in just a few days because the gut responds quickly.

C) Rebuild and support a healthy microbiome. Science has made great leaps and bounds in the past 30 years where gut bacteria is concerned. I recently took a webinar about probiotics and an MD who researches the effects of antibiotics on digestion said antibiotics are kind of like a nuclear bomb to the microbiome. As we all know, sometimes we just have to administer antibiotics but we can help support the good bacteria with probiotics and herbs that act as prebiotics.

D) Remove toxins from the gut. Horses who have been eating dirt, sand, wood and other in-edibles to stave off starvation can have horribly scarred guts loaded with the junk they have eaten. The process of getting these various things out of the gut should be approached slowly and steadily over the course of a year or more. Do not get in a hurry on this!!! The gut has to be healthy to carry these things out over time.

5) Herbs for digestion

Note: dosages listed below are for an average 1,000 - 1,200 lb. horse



A) Peppermint leaf - first of all, horses adore it. I've had very few horses who didn't like it. It's great as a first herb. It's not only analgesic or painkilling to the gut, it also helps the gut relax. It is also anti-parasitic, anti-inflammatory, anti-biotic and highly nutritious. You can mix it into their feed at a rate of 1-2 Tbsp./meal. And you can give it with every meal for a lifetime. If the weather is particularly cold, though, use a bit of caution. It's a very cooling herb and can make a chilled horse more chilly. If you are using it in the winter, you can balance it with a warming herb like ginger root.



B) Marshmallow root - This herb is actually how our ancestors made marshmallows. They were a sweet treat that was similar but not exactly like today's jet-puffed variety. Marshmallow is a soothing, gentle herb which helps directly heal the gut. It also loosens mucus in

the body by it's action on a nerve in the gut. So as it reaches a certain point in the gut it triggers the body to loosen mucus of all types. It's great also for sinus crud, coughs and bladder issues. You can give this herb at a rate of 1 Tbsp/meal but be sure to add water to the blend when you feed it and stir it in well.



C) Meadowsweet - Filipendula Ulmaria - Meadowsweet is the common name for a few herbs so always make certain you are using filipendula ulmaria. This herb has the same great constituents of aspirin but is also mucilaginous to help protect the gut. It helps with gut and body pain and helps heal the gut. Feed 1/2 to 1 Tbsp/meal.



D) Calendula blossoms - These beautiful yellow flowers add a gentle punch to a digestive blend. One of calendula's major healing qualities is that it encourages growth of new skin cells. It's also anti-biotic, anti-fungal, and anti-inflammatory.

E) Psyllium husks powder or just psyllium husks. This herb is the same one used in Metamucil. Because horses are vegetarians, they have a lot less trouble adjusting to it. It's soothing to the gut, carries trash out of the gut and encourages the growth of beneficial gut bacteria which in turn will bulk up the stool and create better motility. Like marshmallow root add plenty of water to the feed when you add this herb. You can give 1-2 Tbsp/meal.

6) Get started

A) Add herbs one at a time. I find that adding them to soaked hay pellets and/or soaked whole oats, and feeding them as a mash works best. If you just put dried herbs on dry feed the horse will either give a big blow and send them all flying or breathe in and inhale them. Marshmallow root and psyllium can be a choke hazard if a horse eats them dry in one big bunch.

B) Start slowly and work your way up to a full dose over the course of 10-14 days. If the horse starts itching or coughing, back off, wait and try again. Some horses will have a loose stool when they start herbs. If it's just loose and they aren't uncomfortable or colicky this can be a good response as the body starts letting go of unwanted things in the gut. But this phase should only last a day or two at most. Usually you will just see one or two loose piles of poop.

C) Picky eater? If you are dealing with a super-finicky horse go extra-slowly. Often the picky eaters are the ones who survived owners who fed them black/moldy hay, WonderBread and other nasty things. You might even leave a variety of herbs in separate pans for these guys to explore on their own. Gently wet the herbs so they don't end up blown out of the pan but don't leave wet herbs out on warm days because, like hay, they will start to ferment.

7) Buy from a trusted company

I like the herbs I buy from the following companies. If you are going to buy herbs on Amazon, be sure you research the company carefully.

- Mountain Rose Herbs of Oregon sells almost all certified organic herbs
- StarWest Herbs of California has good herbs but be sure to choose only certified organic because they offer both
- Pacific Botanicals of Oregon has excellent herbs but changeable availability. They offer fresh herbs so be sure you are buying dried when you choose the ones you want from them.

8) Avoid non-organic herbs

You are trying to help the horse heal, not add herbicides to his diet. Herbicides are hard on the gut because they kill beneficial bacteria and adversely affect the liver's ability to detoxify the body, in addition to causing cancers and so forth. While you're at it, see if you can find organic hay, pellets and grains.

9) Herbs to avoid

Few herbs are truly deadly to horses but in general avoid:

- A) Devil's Claw for horses with digestive issues. This herb is often found in pain and arthritis formulations.
- B) Horsetail - while it's a good source of dietary silica for other critters, there is evidence it is toxic to horses.
- C) Herbs which are dark, dusty, moldy or smell "off". Occasionally herbs will arrive looking and smelling wrong. Contact the company immediately and send them a photo. Reputable companies will replace your order. Chamomile is one of my favorite digestive herbs but in the past 5 years I've had a Dickens of a time finding properly dried chamomile and it is often dark and doesn't have it's normal fresh, light scent. So I now only use chamomile I raise in my herb garden. Good herbs should arrive smelling wonderful and tasting great. Some are bitter, which is normal but they shouldn't be rotten-bitter.

10) Storing your herbs

Keep them in a dry, dark drawer or cabinet in a cool environment. Keep them in a well-sealed bag or jar. Most herbs will keep for up to one year this way.

11) Some basic caution

- Licorice root is a great digestive herb in smaller quantities. But it's a potentiator which means it can increase the body's ability to absorb other herbs and medications. An appropriate

dosage of a medication can suddenly be too much when licorice root is part of the diet. Licorice root should never be given while medications are being administered.

- If your horse is undergoing any kind of treatment, make sure your veterinarian knows what you are giving and in what quantities. In general if your horse is scheduled for surgery, stop all herbs at least a week in advance because some can be a bit blood-thinning. Again, ask your vet.

- Garlic is a fabulous herb for horses but I avoid it in the early stages of healing gut issues. It can be irritating to the gut early on but you can soon begin adding it to help clear parasites and increase the functioning of the immune system.

- Slippery Elm is a very popular digestive herb but there is an ongoing argument in herb world that it's threatened or endangered. With marshmallow root as a strong alternative which is easy to grow and quickly renewable (faster than a tree), why not use marshmallow root instead?

12) A basic recipe for improving and supporting healthy digestion

This makes one pound which will last about 4-6 weeks for one horse.

6 oz. Marshmallow Root - powdered (buy this powdered unless you have a great grinder like a VitaMix with a dry grinding blade)

4 oz. Peppermint leaf

3 oz. Meadowsweet - filipendula ulmaria, powdered

3 oz. Calendula - powdered

Mix all of these together. Feed 1-2 Tbsp./meal. Add 1-2 Tbsp. psyllium husks powder to each meal. Mix in with soaked organic hay pellets and/or whole oats. Then make yourself a cup of tea from the herb blend. It's yummy! I don't add psyllium to my tea but you can.

13) Recommended reading

- A Modern Horse Herbal by Hilary Page Self
- A Veteran Horse Herbal by Hilary Page Self
- Herbs for Pets by Mary Wulff Tilford and Gregory Tilford
- Equine Herbal and Energetics by Stacy Small and Andrea Baldwin