

Dinnertime Dilemmas

Convince your finicky eaters that food can be fun!

By Rebecca L. McGovney

Some horses are like pigs: they gobble up anything that resembles food. Others seem to have a more delicate palate and little interest in food altogether. In general, finicky eaters are more nervous or high-strung, or they might be influenced by external factors in their barns or their turn-out areas.

Whether your horse turns up his nose at new a feed or supplements, won't drink water, or acts like an 8-year-old child refusing to take its medicine, working with a fussy animal can be frustrating and time consuming. So how do you force feed a horse like this? Does your horse give you that funny look when it's feeding time?

It takes a clever person to work with and around a fussy horse. Read on for some basic tips and fun tricks that are sure to convince your finicky eater to indulge!

Dodging Feed Buckets

Sarah Hyers is the owner and operator of Screven Equine Center in Sylvania, Georgia, which houses six sub-companies, including Embly Racing Stables, Equine Medical Services Hospital and Fox Croft Farm. This 53-acre farm houses between 10 and 15 horses at any one time; not including the hospital. Hyers has been working with horses for more than 30 years. She's discovered several tricks for feeding fussy horses during those three decades.

"I have one horse (Millie) that if I change her feed, she will take her feed bucket and throw it back at me," says Sarah. "If I add garlic she'll throw it back at me. Bran mash? Forget it."

Sarah's recommendation for horses like Millie? Stick with good nutrition.

"If you start with quality you will end with quality," she says.

One of her tips: Clean both feed and water buckets daily, rinse them out and hang them to air dry. Not only will this reduce the fly population in the barn, the buckets will smell sweet. She also advises horse owners to provide good fresh water, good quality feed and good quality hay.

"Past that, I recommend nothing unless recommended by a vet or a

farrier,” Sarah says. “You come up against people who mix all this stuff together, it’s like a witches brew. Only feed the horse what it needs for what it is doing.”

As for some tricks in dealing with fussy horses, Sarah recommends mixing a pinch of baking soda in a horse’s water. Baking soda neutralizes odors that can be offensive to fussy horses.

Disguising the Meds

It’s easy to give dogs oral medications. Just roll up canine meds in a piece of meat, and most dogs will gulp it down. Unfortunately, most horses are suspicious if they see little white pills in their feed buckets.

Mary Bradshaw, who works with Dancing Horses Farm in Ocala, Florida, uses a special concoction when medicating fussy horses under her care.

Mary has been a trainer for Dancing Horses Farm since April 2003.

Previously, she worked with horses for more than 25 years in Michigan.

“ One time I had to go away and a horse had to have bute twice a day, so I got the little cups that come with a NyQuil® bottle and put one tablet in each cup,” she says. “I plopped some apple sauce, (about one tablespoon) down on top of them and put them in the fridge. The bute will dissolve by the next day so you don’t have to crush it.”

After that, Mary places the apple sauce mixture into a syringe, adds water, shakes the syringe and is ready to go.

When medicating horses during hot weather, Mary recommends using a Jell-O mixture because it remains fresh longer. She combines some Jell-O powder, the horse’s medicine, and water in a syringe, and then shakes it to mix the ingredients together.

Sarah Hyres uses a similar method for Millie, who hates taking medicine. Sarah simply grinds medicine tablets up and then mixes the powder with Cairo syrup. She can then place the sweet-tasting mixture into a large syringe and then directly into Millie’s mouth.

Environmental Concerns

Mary Bradshaw attributes a horse’s fussy behavior to being uncomfortable in its environment. Horses that are uncomfortable might become uneasy in their stalls, act aloof, turn up their noses, trash their hay and more. Mary believes these horses are not being malicious, they are just insecure.

“ A fussy horse is a horse that isn’t comfortable where he is for one reason or another,” she says. “A lot of it has to do with confidence. They don’t have confidence in themselves or the people around them. They don’t

have a good routine or any sort of continuity in their lives that they can rely on. Horses are creatures of habit, and if things change they can get upset.”

Her best remedy for this? Keep horses in as much of a consistent, daily routine as possible, and feeding times will become easier with time.

Both Sarah Hyres and Mary Bradshaw suggest using coffee grinders to crush hard medicine tablets. Purchase large syringes at feed stores, and snip off the syringe tips to allow a large amount of fluid medicine mixtures to flow easily through syringes.

Always remember: When dealing with fussy horses, first check with your veterinarian to make sure a medical problem is not causing the behavior. Dealing with a fussy horse takes some originality, resourcefulness and a lot of extra time, but most people believe the joys of living with them to outweigh the frustrations.

Do you have some tips and tricks to share? Email them to us at editor@ecmagazine.net, and if we print your horse-keeping tip in a future ec magazine, we'll mail you a special thank-you gift!

Ginger Larson

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