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Herbs for Horses:

A Personal Perspective

Text and photos by Cindy Daigre

I have been fascinated with the healing properties of herbs for 20 years. I planted my first herbs – calendula, thyme, rosemary, and lavender – in pots on my apartment balcony when I was in graduate school. A few months later I convinced the farm owners where I was boarding my horses to let me plant herbs in a small patch of their garden. In 1996, when I bought what is now Ferrell Hollow Farm (FHF), I planted my own herb garden and truly began studying their unique properties. Not only did I plant herbs for culinary purposes, I grew herbs that would benefit the horses as well.

Some of the first herbs cultivated at FHF were comfrey, calendula and meadowsweet. I created an herb bed behind the horse barn so it would be easily accessible. I used them fresh (in food and for topical purposes) and also dried them to store for later use. Comfrey is excellent for bruising; calendula is gentle on wounds and skin conditions while meadowsweet contains the same pain relieving properties as aspirin. I soon found myself on a mission to learn as much as possible and I enrolled in a naturopathic correspondence course with an emphasis in herbology.

Each year I expanded the content and purpose of my herb garden. By the time I built a new homestead at FHF, I had much more knowledge and designed a garden area that was accessible by stepping out my back door. This is the fourth year since the inception of the new gardens and I have found them to be quite bountiful this year!

Know What's Best For Your Horse

*C*hamomile has calming properties, which are useful for the nervous horse or for the mare who becomes mildly nervous or anxious when in season. It is also an excellent stomach tonic often

used for horses in digestive distress or colic. Chamomile is readily accepted by horses for its sweet smell and taste. It is particularly appealing to horses when the dried flowers are steeped as a tea and poured over a meal ration. The cooled tea can also be syringed in the mouth.

*E*chinacea is a potent immune booster that is often given to horses with chronic infections and illnesses. Older horses typically have lowered immune systems and can benefit from echinacea's immune stimulant properties. If your horse has an autoimmune condition or is on medication to lower the immune response, stimulating the immune system would not be warranted. The root of the plant is most commonly used; however, the leaves and flowers can also be harvested and dried. The root can be fed in cut and sifted or powdered form.

*F*ennel is specific for horses with flatulence and is useful for gas colic. The seeds help support the digestive process and will assist in re-establishing the healthy flora in the intestines. A tea can be made from the seeds and added to the feed or water, or the fresh plant can be fed.

*G*arlic has been given to the horses at my farm for many years to repel ticks. It is rich in sulfur, which is excreted through the skin pores to deter biting insects. Some horses will eat a raw garlic clove, while others prefer the granulated form. I have found that 2 teaspoons a day of dried garlic is sufficient to keep ticks away.

*L*avender is a favorite for the herbal first aid kit and is typically for topical purposes; not given internally. It speeds the healing process of wounds by encouraging cell growth. A few drops of the essential oil of lavender can be diluted in water and used to clean wounds. It can also be mixed in a carrier oil such as sweet almond



Lavender, a favorite for the herbal first aid kit, in bloom at Ferrell Hollow Farm

oil, for a relaxing massage. Lavender has a very calm and soothing aroma which can benefit both the horse and owner when inhaling it.

Mint, specifically peppermint and spearmint, can be used to encourage picky eaters due to its pleasing aroma and taste. It is used for digestive complaints, including ulcers or colic. It makes a nice tea, whether given in the summer or winter, poured over meal rations. The fresh herb may be picked straight from the garden and fed. Due to its stimulating and anti-inflammatory properties, it can also be made into a tonic for sore muscles. It is also used in many natural fly sprays to repel insects.

Nettle is often found growing in pastures and fence rows. This mineral-rich herb must be allowed to dry after being cut or picked to eliminate the “sting” and is best used cut up instead of whole to avoid eating the spikes. Nettle should be cut when the plants are young and tender, before they flower, and allowed to dry for 2 weeks to take the sting out. The leaves can then be stripped from the stems and used. A tea brewed from dried nettle leaf is an excellent way to address dry, itchy skin as well as put dapples into a dark coat.

Parsley is used for any digestive complaint including flatulence as it expels gas and colic. Either the fresh or dried leaves can be fed. Interestingly, crushing parsley leaves and rubbing them onto a mosquito bite will reduce the itching.



Mary, a 24-year-old retired carriage horse, shows off the dapples in her coat. She enjoys having nettle tea poured over her morning meal.

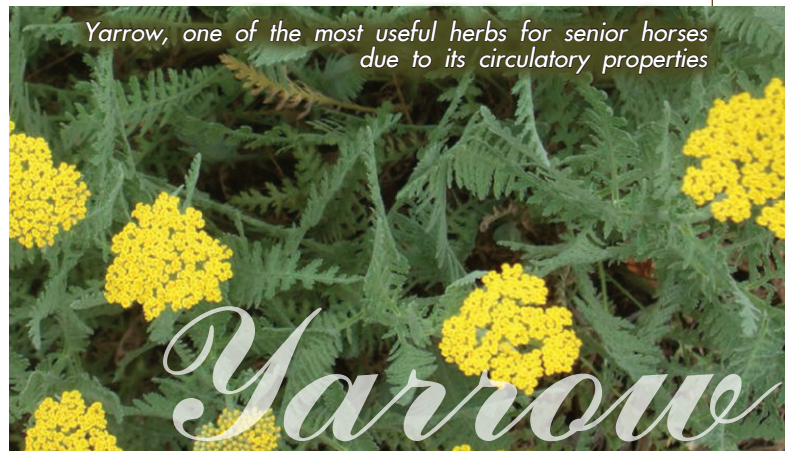
Rosemary is useful for arthritis and muscular pain. It stimulates circulation in achy, senior horses and makes a good rub when combined with a carrier oil. The dried leaves are often added to the feed for horses with inflammation.

Sage (garden sage) is helpful for any infections or ulcers in the mouth. A tea can be made from the dried sage leaves and syringed directly into the mouth.


Thyme can be brewed as a tea and used as a wash for skin irritations. It also contains properties that make it good for any digestive complaint. The dried leaves can be added to the feed.

Wormwood is a bitter herb most often used internally to expel worms. The plant is harvested late in the summer after it flowers. Internal preparations are for short term use only. Externally, a wash can be made to eliminate lice.

Yarrow is one of the most useful herbs for senior horses due to its circulatory properties. Horses that become foot sore for reasons such as laminitis or navicular benefit from being given fresh or dried leaves and flowers. Yarrow will also stop a bleeding wound if the flower of the plant is applied directly to the wound. Additionally, it can be given for internal bleeding coming from the nostrils or in the urine.



Yarrow, one of the most useful herbs for senior horses due to its circulatory properties

By no means is this an exhaustive list of herbs that can be used for horses. It's merely a sampling of herbs that have grown well in Ferrell Hollow Farm's gardens and have been used with the senior horses residing at the retirement property. 

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For more information:

A Modern Horse Herbal - by Hilary Page Self

A Healthy Horse the Natural Way - by Catherine Bird

About the author:

Cindy Daigre is the founder and director of Ferrell Hollow Farm, an Equine Retirement facility in Tennessee focusing on the unique concerns of Senior and Special Needs horses. In addition, she provides Equine Nutritional Consultations and has developed a specialized line of Natural Horse Care Products.

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