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Getting an experienced, reliable horse sitter will help you worry less during your vacation.

Tips to Finding the Perfect Horse Sitter

By Stacie G. Boswell, DVM, DACVS

For those who need a horse sitter, it is important that you trust the person you hire. If you ask around or read Internet discussion boards, you can easily find horror stories. How *does* one find a trustworthy and knowledgeable person?

Choose somebody with experience

Ask about the person's level of experience. How many years have they had horses? Have they cared for their own? Do they have work experience with a veterinarian, a stable, or a trainer? You want a person who can think about a situation and make a good decision; somebody with common sense and horse sense.

Can the person you are interviewing halter and lead the horse? Do they understand the importance of a feeding schedule and access to water? Watch the person interact with your horses. Do they seem comfortable and confident?

If you have other pets, it may be prudent to hire one person who will care for the horses and another who will care for your other pets. For example, if you have six pet

birds as well as a horse, finding the right person with experience with both horses and birds may be tricky.

Make sure they can provide the level of care you expect

If the person is working three part-time jobs and can only feed at 4AM and midnight, they might not be able to make sure that Sweetie gets all her supplements or even notice that Charger is lame on the left front. Are they going to be able to at least look at your horses in the daylight? Will their schedule be able to closely approximate the times you normally feed and care for your horses? Will the person be able to commit extra time if an emergency does occur? Do they need to stay overnight at your house or just visit briefly? Make your expectations clear, so you know the person can meet them. You want the person to do things your way: A red flag would be somebody who suggests changes in your routine.

Are you willing and able to pay somebody appropriately for the time commitment

required? Some horse sitters will require full payment upfront, and all should be paid at least partially up front.

Set them up for success

Instructions should be brief, clearly written, and available. It is a good idea to send one in an email so that an electronic copy is available. Placing a printed copy in your feed room in the barn and another printed copy in other areas that need care is a good idea. For example, place another on your kitchen counter near where your dog is fed.

Simplify your routine! You want your horses to get the best care possible. Prioritize what is most important. Pre-measure and label supplements. You may consider pre-measuring and labeling grain portions as well. Clean and top off all of your water troughs. Make sure gates are working/latching properly.

Label everything – you don't want somebody to mistake the chicken layer pellets for the horse pellets! Identify your

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horses – three chestnut geldings may be very different to you, but strikingly similar to others. Make sure halters and lead ropes for each horse are accessible and ready.

Ensure that hay, feed, and supplies are well stocked. If your pet sitter runs out of shavings on Thursday, you are much more likely to find unsatisfactory stalls when you return on Sunday!

Show them everything at your barn and house that they will need to know. Have your prospective person go through every step with you with the printed instructions in hand and while you clarify verbally. It is also a good idea for your horse sitter to do a “practice run” while you are still in town, so that any unforeseen questions or concerns can be identified and addressed.

Check references and ask about certification

This is important. Check references – check all of them. Ask the references if the pet sitter has ever had to deal with an emergency for them. How was it handled? Did they follow instructions? Are there any extenuating circumstances about the person that might influence their ability to do a good job?

Being licensed, insured, or a certified professional certainly isn't necessary to do a good job. It does, however, show that they have a high level of commitment, which can translate to excellent care. A pet sitting company will likely have online reviews that you can peruse as well.

Prepare for emergencies

Instructions for your veterinarian should be clearly written in detail and signed. It is a good idea to call your veterinarian's office and let them know exactly what dates you expect to be away, give them the pet sitter's name and contact information, and arrange for treatment authorization and payment. Consider involving a close friend or relative as a back-up person for tough decisions. Leave a copy of your itinerary and your contact information while you will be away.

Discuss with your caretaker your choices for each of your animals for intensive care, surgery, or euthanasia. Make your budget clear. Talk to them about previous medical history, and have a binder or file ready with the information about each animal in case it is needed.

Write out contact information for your farrier, your veterinarian, your insurance company, and any other relevant people, so your pet sitter has easy access. If you are not traveling with your truck and trailer, have it hooked up and ready to roll. If the pet sitter is not comfortable with driving it, or if it will be with you, find a trustworthy person to be available to transport your horses in your absence.

Enjoy your worry-free vacation!

Careful upfront screening and preparation will increase your chances of having a worry-free vacation! The bottom line is that doing your homework upfront will help make sure your beloved horses are well cared for while you are away.

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