

Herbal Remedies for Horse Health

A different type of greenery may be what your horse needs.

By Marcia King

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Ever wish there was a way to calm your horse, help him heal or reduce his pain naturally? According to equine herbalists, and even some veterinarians, herbs provide effective aid for a variety of equine mental and physical issues. In fact, you've probably seen some common herbs in the supplement section of your local feed store. But what is the purpose, safety and effectiveness of these products, and how might they fit in with your horse's health care program?

Hilary P. Self, a medical herbalist and director/co-founder of Hilton Herbs, based in Somerset, England, international purveyors of herbal- and plant-based products for equines and canines, explains that herbs and herbal products, when used correctly in horses, can help prevent or minimize the onset of certain disorders, treat various physical and behavioral conditions (both acute and chronic) and strengthen general health by giving the body the ability to heal itself. But Hilary says the way herbs are used and their role in equine health is often misunderstood.

Why Herbs?

Herbal Health:
Another Viewpoint

Not everyone in the veterinary community believes herbs have much of a role in prevention and treatment. Kevin G. Keegan, DVM, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons, associate professor (Department of Veterinary Medicine and Surgery), University of Missouri, Columbia, says, "Purveyors of herbal treatments for horses and humans suggest that herbs are useful for a variety of medical conditions. Mostly these conditions are vaguely described, difficult to definitively document, usually self-limiting or just plain made up. The potency of most herbal products is low. This is why in most cases they are not dangerous to use. It is also why they don't work to any significant extent."

Dr. Keegan also expresses a concern for the lack of regulations that govern herbal products. "They are considered a food supplement rather than a pharmaceutical," he says. "Therefore, you never really know what you are getting in terms of purity or concentration."

If you use herbal products, be sure to tell your veterinarian prior to administration of any pharmaceuticals. Dr. Keegan warns, "Although the risk is slight that herbal products will interfere or adversely interact with concurrently administered medications, at least give your veterinarian the chance to investigate the possibility. There are some notable exceptions in humans and animals where the administration of herbal products has caused injury and death."

There's no doubt that pharmaceuticals offer powerful and effective treatments for a myriad of various short-term and chronic problems. But they are more effective for some problems than others and, depending on the particular drug, carry a risk of side effects—a special concern for long-term use. Consequently, many people seek an alternative or complementary therapy and traditional plant-based remedies—namely herbs, such as yucca, garlic, goldenrod, milk thistle and many others.

Herbal use for medical and veterinary applications is not new. For centuries, herb and plant materials were the basis for most human and veterinary medicines. Through the ages, the specific chemical agents in plants that produced the therapeutic effects were identified, isolated, extracted, and eventually, synthesized; today's medicines are almost exclusively produced from chemical substances as opposed to natural plant sources. With their long history in medical tradition and relationship to their pharmaceutical cousins, herbal complements and alternatives make a lot of sense to some people.

"Herbs and herbal products have their indications and limitations," states Allen M. Schoen, MS, DVM, director of the Veterinary Institute for Therapeutic Alternatives in Sherman, Ct. Dr. Schoen is a member of the Veterinary Botanical Medicine Association and lectures on herbal medicine at the School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. He says herbal products have their place in equine prevention and treatment if there is some justification for use based on studies, traditional use or experiential evidence. "Their most appropriate use is when medications are not working or are having

side effects, where surgery is not a reasonable option or where there is no appropriate conventional medical treatment. Sometimes, clients prefer to try herbs before trying a medication that may have significant side effects. However, herbal products should not be used when an appropriate medication or surgery is indicated.”

Prevention and Treatment

Hilary Self has been using herbs in equine preventative medicine and treatments for more than 20 years, working with and receiving referrals from a local veterinarian. She says, “The biggest problem is to make the owner understand that generally herbs, as a treatment, do not work in the same way or as quickly as conventional medicines. People have become so used to giving a pharmaceutical and seeing the symptoms disappear overnight that they can lose heart or patience with complementary therapies. What they forget is that the conditions manifested in their horses have often taken years to develop, therefore it’s unrealistic to expect them to be cured overnight.”

According to Hilary, herbal treatments not only help alleviate clinical signs, they

Further Reading

A Modern Horse Herbal by Hilary Page Self (Half Halt Press).
Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine: Principles and Practice by Allen Schoen, MS, DVM, and Susan Wynn (Mosby).

Complete Holistic Care And Healing For Horses—The Owner’s Veterinary Guide To Alternative Methods And Remedies by Mary L. Brennan, DVM, and Norma Eckroate (Trafalgar Square).

The Herbal Handbook for Farm and Stable by Juliette de Bairacli Levy (Faber & Faber).

potentially relieve the root cause of the problem. “Herbal medicine looks at the whole horse,” Hilary says. “For example, with an arthritic horse, you would use herbs with anti-inflammatory and analgesic actions, such as devil’s claw, yucca, turmeric, willow, meadowsweet and yarrow; herbs to stimulate circulation and improve blood supply to the affected area; herbs to support the removal of inflammatory waste products from tissue; and herbs that encourage excretion of toxins from the body by supporting the liver and kidneys. Arthritic joints have a propensity to accumulate acidic inflammatory waste products in the area, so it’s beneficial if you can use herbs that will not only cleanse the affected tissues of the waste products but also then support the body in the removal of these products via the kidneys.”

When used in prevention, herbs should be given three to four weeks in advance of the “danger period” to allow the herbal properties to get into the body system, Hilary explains. “For example, a horse prone to seasonal allergies (allergic rhinitis, sweet itch, et cetera) should be administered the appropriate dried herbs well ahead of time. Another example is preparation for winter when a horse’s immunity may be lowered or there is an increased risk of viral infection. Obviously, prevention only works if you know of a pre-existing problem, but every physiological system of the horse can benefit from the prophylactic use of herbs.”

When You Use Herbs

Be informed and responsible when administering any product to your horse. First, make sure you know what condition you’re addressing via a proper veterinary diagnosis. “Once owners have a diagnosis, they are in a better position to choose which herbal product will be most suitable,” says Hilary.

Next, make sure your veterinarian knows about any herbs you intend to give your horse, especially if the horse is on other medications, and consult with an expert on which herbs to use. “Definitely, talk with either a veterinarian trained in herbal medicine or a trained herbal expert,” advises Dr. Schoen.

Just because herbs are natural doesn’t mean they are harmless. Misuse can cause harm. Follow label instructions and veterinary advice on usage, as overdosing could pose a risk to your horse. Don’t combine too many products, either. “Many owners seem to think using a ‘cocktail’ of supplements is a good idea,” Hilary says. “They mix a variety of herbal, homeopathic, aromatherapy and vitamin supplement products together, with no thought of the cumulative effect on the horse. I always liken this to a person taking a couple of Valium, plus some Prozac, and washing the whole lot down with a large gin and tonic!”

If you compete, check your show association’s list of banned substances before administering herbal products. Some herbs will “test” positive. Introduce the herbs gradually, as you would any new feed, and monitor for reactions. Adverse side effects are rare, but horses are individuals and can exhibit allergic reactions, Hilary warns. “Introduce the herbs slowly and build up to the full dosage over seven to 10 days. Generally, if the horse is going to exhibit any allergic reactions, they will tend to occur in the first 24 hours.”

Finally, be patient and give your herbs a chance to work. "It takes approximately three to four weeks for dried herbs to get into the system and start to have a beneficial effect," Hilary points out, "and five to 10 days for herbal tinctures to be effective."

With careful research on your part, herbal remedies can be another effective health aid for your horse.

Further Reading
An Herbal Sampler

Marcia King is an award-winning freelance writer specializing in animal health and welfare topics.

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