

Modular Barns

Make the most out of modular, pre-engineered barns.

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About the author

Cindy Hale and her family went through the whole pre-engineered barn building process and lived to tell about it.

It used to be that owners had few choices when constructing a home for their horses. Designs were generally limited to the tried-and-true Plain Jane pole barn: uprights sunk directly into the earth that supported rafters and a roof, with planks of wood slapped onto a wooden frame. These structures were sturdy for a while, but quickly became quaint and rickety. With advances in pre-engineered modular buildings, creativity in design and horse-friendly materials, today's horse owners can now have the barn of their dreams in just a couple of stress-free days.

Erector Set

With so much invested in a new barn, it's best to leave its construction to the professionals unless you are a master craftsman. "We know all of the ins and outs of our product, so we can do it a lot faster. A standard six-stall barn goes up in two days," says Terri Bartz with MD Barns. MD's pre-engineered barns are a nuts 'n bolts sort of installation, but they do not come with blueprints or instructions, which makes it hard for the handiest of handymen. Plus, there isn't a warranty for do-it-yourselfers. "When we install the barn, we honor any customer service issues that might come up due to installation problems. We also honor any type of warranty issues that might arise, since we did the installation we are responsible for all issues of the barn due to installation or manufacturing."

On the other hand, Suzy Edwards of Castlebrook Barns sees potential for a return to the barn raising parties of yesteryear. "All of our parts are numbered, and we include a manual and photos to guide the process." Suzy explains that once a flat, level piece of ground is prepped and the cement foundation is formed and poured, "A four-stall barn can go up in a day."

Barnmaster allows for either scenario. You can contract with a Barnmaster-approved installation crew or put the barn together yourself.

Keep in mind that the steel supports of pre-engineered, modular barns are anchored to their cement foundation. With a faulty foundation, the barn can shift, causing stress on its joints and seams. Make note that your particular local codes may dictate specifications for barns. **Get Started**

If you're in the market for a horse home, the first thing to consider is the outlay of your property. Where is the best place for your barn in relation to the rest of your horsekeeping amenities? Simply plopping the barn down in the center of your acreage leaves little planning for current needs such as parking or an arena and disregards any future acquisitions, such as a wash rack, hay barn or turnout paddock.

Terri Bartz, MD Barns' marketing analyst and assistant to the company's national sales managers, agrees that barn location is of paramount importance. She suggests some questions to ask yourself as you map out the barn's placement. "Would it be easy access for you to get feed to and from your feed room? Is it easy access for the farrier or vet to come onto the property and work with your horses? How about an area for you to tack up for a quick ride or load up into the trailer? You also might want to consider the placement of your barn in relation to the weather. Which way do the winds blow? From which direction does the rain and snow generally arrive?"

What do you do if your property already has some permanent structures obstructing your ideal barn site? Before you chop down that old oak tree or level your grandparents' homestead, consult with a representative from your barn manufacturer. No doubt that person can help you come up with a barn configuration that will mesh adequately with your property. The reason? Contemporary pre-engineered barns are modular in form. That means that the framing and stall panels are manufactured in set measurements of 4, 8, 10 or 12 feet (depending on the manufacturer), which allow for some broad creativity in planning a barn's layout. Inline stalls, for example, are configured just as the name suggests: in a line. That permits a straight row of stalls, a "U," "H" or "L" shape, or even a back-to-back design where stalls share a common center wall. One of these space-saver barns can fit onto even the most obtusely shaped property.

Hot Tip!

Sometimes paying a little more for some options is worthwhile in the long run. Additional grill work, for example, adds ventilation to your barn and may discourage respiratory ailments in your horses. A final consideration with your new barn's location is drainage. Though your barn should be installed atop a raised pad, an abundance of rain can still threaten your stalls or at the very least make feeding and mucking a torturous task if you aren't appreciative of the natural flow of water. If you're in doubt as to the drainage dilemmas specific to your property, invest in a consultation with a surveyor before marking an "X" for your barn on your hand-drawn map.

Is Wood Good?

Remember the tale about the three little pigs? Though you won't have to worry about a quality pre-engineered barn being huffed and puffed into oblivion, there are differences in the actual materials used to construct them. It's up to you to objectively look at the data. One relatively easy comparison you can make is to decide if you want a typical steel barn or a wooden one. Though virtually all modular barns are constructed using steel framework, the wall panels can be either a plywood core laminated to steel sheeting or tongue and groove (T & G) wood.

Castlebrook Barns is known for its T & G wooden barns that are set on steel frames and offer a metal roof. Sales manager Suzy Edwards explains that clients are attracted to Castlebrook's design because, "they look less industrial" than the typical steel modular barn. "Most of our clients find the wood appearance more aesthetically pleasing. It fits more with the rest of the buildings on their properties."

An added bonus, according to Suzy, is that wood is a "natural insulator. It doesn't conduct heat, so the barns stay cooler in the hot summer."

Contrary to popular belief, a well-made wooden modular barn, Suzy says, isn't more fragile. "They take a lot of abuse. Just like a tree that bends in the wind, our barns flex with impact. And the inside surface of the wood is smooth, so horses are not able to grab onto the surface and chew."

But what about fire danger? Suzy points out that the metal roof, combined with treated wood, makes the barn flame retardant.

There are, undoubtedly, some drawbacks to even the best wooden modular barns. First, the wood is generally raw. That means that you, the client, must see to it that the lumber is properly sealed and or stained. Next, despite the no-chew promise, a creative horse can still find a way to grate his teeth against the wood, leaving cosmetic blemishes. Finally, wood-loving insects in parts of the country can pose a threat to a wooden barn if the integrity of the wood isn't maintained.

In defense of the steel modular barns, MD Barns' Terri Bartz says there are options to make them more visually appealing. Beyond choices in exterior and roof colors, there are swank faux applications that lend the look of tongue and groove or even heavy stucco. Also, the non-porous, smooth interior finish of a steel barn makes it easy to wash down and disinfect a stall following a horse's illness or before foaling out a mare. "That's why so many veterinary clinics use steel in their modular barns," Terri says.

Balancing Your Barn Budget

"Everyone has a dream, but everyone has a certain budget to maintain, too," Terri acknowledges. When it comes to selecting a pre-engineered barn with a plethora of appealing options, you'll have to decide between what your heart desires and what you and your horses truly need. Fortunately, there's help in the decision-making process.

"There are so many different ways that [manufacturers] can work with you to lower the cost of your barn," Terri says. "The best way to go at it is to let the salesperson know what your budget is and then discuss what you would love to have. Then, working together, you can get the best barn at the price you can afford."

Because you're essentially designing your own barn from a wealth of ready-to-go offerings, it's easy to get carried away. Fairly soon the dollars add up. Rather than bursting your barn budget bubble and ending up so penny poor that you can barely afford to stock your feed room, think about what you really need. According to Terri, the list of "can't live without items" can vary from one horse owner to the next.

"Some people like the ease of automatic waterers, whereas others would prefer to always fill up their horses' water buckets so they can tell how much water their horses are consuming," Terri says. "Some people like the hay rack and feed pan combo, but other people like feeding their horses off of the ground."

A simple thing such as selecting stall doors suddenly becomes not so simple. Again, sometimes the stylish option—which could add cost to the barn budget—isn't the best choice anyway.

"If you go for the Dutch door (a two-piece door where the top half can be left open), you need to look at the type of horse you might have in your barn. Is the horse aggressive? You don't want to worry about people walking down the aisle and the horse getting in their face if the Dutch door is open."

You can keep additional costs low by concentrating on a company's standard barn styles and comparing those to competitor offerings. Warranties also add to the value of the barn without adding directly to the initial cost. Be sure to inquire about warranties, and make sure that the manufacturer stands behind the product. Many pre-engineered barns offer some sort of kick-through guarantee. If your horse gets rambunctious and kicks a wall hard enough to break into the wood encased within the steel, that partition or section will need to be replaced. It's a rare occurrence, but it can happen. A substantial kick-through warranty can potentially save you future repair bills.

Installment Plan

For horse owners with a penchant for creative design and a love for the look of wood, modular stall companies offer another choice in barn building options. These manufacturers make and sell the components for a dream barn rather than the entire package like mainstream modular manufacturers.

“Most of our clients enjoy the benefits of having components that are made to order rather than being prefabricated in set sizes,” explains Woodstar Products marketing and sales director Kelly Bridges.

Kelly says that the typical customer already has a pre-existing barn exterior or “shell,” whether it’s made of cement block, fabric, wood or metal. But they would like customized stalls inside. Manufacturers commonly have catalogs of various wooden stall doors, assembled and ready to hang, along with a plethora of metal grill panels that function as inserts for stall partitions. Companies also offer the U-channels that will hold the lumber for wooden stall partitions, any necessary hardware, written instructions and perhaps a video that demonstrates construction of a stall from start to finish.

“What’s nice is that any stalls made with us are truly customized,” Kelly says. “If construction plans require stalls with partitions that are 11 feet, 6 inches rather than a pre-manufactured 12 feet, we can do that. Draft horses? Minis? We have doors and grill panels scaled in size to fit both.”Aisle of Dreams

When you have a good idea of your actual budget, you have to determine which style of barn you can afford that also meets your needs. The placement of a barn’s aisle can alter both its look and function.

Do you have room to spare on your land? Are you blessed with a liberal barn budget? You might opt for a center aisle design, also commonly referred to as a breezeway barn, which requires additional space and money. In this style of barn the horses look into a covered center aisle. Large doors at either end of the center aisle can be closed during inclement weather. The center aisle provides shelter during farrier or vet visits when Mother Nature isn’t cooperating. During hot spells, the breezeway doors are left open to encourage air circulation, providing you’ve aligned your barn with the usual wind directions. Center aisle designs come with either a raised roof or a gable roof. The raised roof is more expensive because it includes a separate expanse of roof that bridges both rows of stalls. This allows for extra ventilation and is a wise choice for very warm or humid locales. The gable roof is a pitched roof that is continuous from one row of stalls to the other. The degree of pitch and the coziness of the insulation factor make the gable roof appropriate for climates with a lot of winter snowfall.

Horse owners in sunny, dry climates often choose a shedrow or inline barn. Though they lack the intimacy of a center aisle or breezeway, the classic row of stalls with the generous overhang still provides shade during hot summer months and an overhead shelter during barn chores. Inline barns are more economical, too, because they make use of shared walls between stalls.

Finally, Barnmaster offers a fourth choice: a gambrel barn, which is a variation on the center aisle barn. Despite being a modular barn, Barnmaster’s gambrel barn resembles a contemporary take on vintage barns of the past (think a rounder roof line). With so many styles you can surely come up with a barn that will be a retreat for both you and your horse.