

Are you ready to take in boarders?

Consider boarding horses to subsidize your equestrian habit

By Bette B. Brand, Farm Credit of the Virginias

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If you own a horse or two and are struggling in these economic times, you might consider taking in boarders to subsidize your equestrian hobby.

Boarding horses can have many benefits beyond financial ones. However, it is also a big responsibility, so give it some serious thought to make sure you are ready to make that commitment.

My family has been boarding horses on a small scale for more than 30 years. My children and I have three horses that we keep at their grandparents' farm; my parents have another five horses and donkeys of their own and board another three, in addition to ours, at their farm in Virginia.

The extra money from boarding a horse does help. For a stall and two feedings per day, you can charge anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000 a month depending on your location. The extra horse you now have on the property will increase your feed and hay bill by roughly \$200 a month. Any amount over the cost of feed and general maintenance can then help subsidize your own horse's feed costs, veterinary care and upkeep of your property.

Boarders are also good for your own horses. They are herd animals so they do better when other horses are around. Just be careful your horse doesn't become too attached to another horse. To avoid co-dependency issues, make sure each horse gets some routine alone time.

There may also be in-kind benefits. Your boarders, for a reduced rate, may be willing to help care for the animals, such as when you are on vacation. The other owners may also have expertise to share, or equipment such as tack or a horse trailer. Plus, having someone else to ride with is fun.

Just remember, boarding horses is a big responsibility. Consider the fact that these are 1,000 to 1,200 pound animals that rely 100% on your care. You need to have knowledge about horses, sufficient fencing and enough acreage. Five acres per animal is a good rule of thumb. If you have one or two horses of your own, boarding another two or three is plenty. Don't overwhelm yourself.

The owners of those animals are another issue. It's like taking in roommates; they seldom show as much care for your property as you do. Always check references. After all, you are allowing these people to access the property where you live. Depending on how your property is set up, you may have to get used to them parking in your driveway and walking through your backyard.

Boarding horses has its ups and downs, so judge for yourself whether this is right for you.

If you think you're ready, there are some preliminary matters to address: Make sure your property is properly zoned. Make sure your land is not overgrazed. Check your liability insurance to make sure it is adequate. Make sure your facility is in proper shape – for both humane and legal reasons. Make sure you have a contract and that your boarders understand it.

You will be responsible to feed the horses twice a day. Since feed costs have risen so dramatically in the past year, I suggest a contract clause that allows you to raise rates based on the price of feed and hay. Be absolutely clear that the other owners are responsible for their own veterinary bills and hoof care. You will still need to be mindful of their horses' health and keep watch for veterinary emergencies, just as you would for your own horses.

Enhancing your facilities is not necessarily expensive. You may already have enough stable space.

If you are starting from scratch, there are other things to consider. Say you own a horse or two that are boarded elsewhere. Perhaps you are ready to move out to the country where you can have more property, build a barn and take your horses home with you. Think ahead. Build your barn big enough to eventually take in boarders. You may want to spend the first year getting used to taking care of your own horses on a daily basis before taking in boarders.

If you are going to depend on this extra income, think like a business person. If you need financing, have a sound business plan. Make sure there is a need in your area. Boarders come and go. Build a waiting list, so you can quickly keep the income going.

Often hiring help is more trouble than it is worth in a hobby operation. It only adds complications and reduces your income. Make sure you and your family have enough time to feed and exercise the horses yourselves.

The best way to find boarders is often word of mouth. Check with the local equestrian organizations. If you must advertise, area horse publications work better than the local newspaper. Your ad should read almost like a personal ad; you are looking for like-minded horse enthusiasts, people with whom you can be compatible.

Also consider the type of horse. For example, a thoroughbred just off the race track generally requires more feed and more supervision while a Quarter Horse is generally easier to maintain. Horses age 4-15 are a good range: they're old enough to have begun the training process and young enough hopefully not to have major medical issues that would require more of your attention. In considering the cost of feeding a horse, you should factor in the horse's age, amount of riding or work the horse will be doing, the condition of the horse and if he is an easy keeper.

Be careful about boarding a friend's horse. You don't want business to spoil a friendship.

Most important of all, is your own quality of life. None of the benefits of boarding will be worthwhile if all of a sudden your equestrian hobby starts to feel like a job. Remember, the goal is to enhance your ability to enjoy riding and pursue your love for horses.

About the author

Bette B. Brand is Chief Sales Officer for Farm Credit of the Virginias, where she participates in the financing of equine and agricultural facilities in 96 counties throughout Virginia and West Virginia. She has 26 years of experience with the Farm Credit system. Ms. Brand is a past president of the Virginia Horse Council and was appointed by Gov. Mark Warner to the Virginia Equine Center Foundation. She has an MBA degree and a bachelor's degree in animal science from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. She owns three horses and occasionally serves as a certified open horse show judge.