

Healthy domesticated horses, kept
as naturally as possible

Herbs for horses

by Jennie van der Byl



For millennia wild horses were able to develop an acute sense of which herbage to browse on regularly to keep themselves in peak health throughout the seasons of their lives. By domesticating horses, we have taken that privilege away from them.

Besides their medicinal properties, herbs have a vast array of bio-available trace minerals, vitamins, amino acids, essential oils and scores of other phytonutrients, such as flavonoids, many of which have only been discovered by modern science in recent years, and are continuing to be discovered rapidly as studies are being intensified.

Studies are now showing how essential these nutrients are to achieve superior long-term health. These nutrients are only just being identified and beginning to be understood, so there certainly isn't any synthetic "alternative" available. Even vitamins that have been studied and synthesised for many years already are only a very poor copy indeed, and even minor excessive quantities can swiftly reach toxic

levels, whereas the body has greater benefit from organic, bio-available food-sourced minerals and vitamins, and they are less likely to pose a toxic threat.

By feeding our modern horses with concentrates and hays, most of which have been harvested from overworked and under-replenished farmlands that are lacking in trace minerals, we are restricting the nutritional variety that horses require to achieve prime health. Most feed manufacturers add small quantities of a pre-mixed trace mineral blend to the final product, and although this is somewhat helpful, unfortunately these pre-mixes only contain the absolutely minimal trace minerals required (very limited variety – just those required to sustain basic functionality). This leaves potential for a big nutritional shortfall of the more minor trace minerals, which are essential for long-term good health. Supplementing our modern horses' diet with a variety of herbs will help to make up these nutritional shortfalls.

Large areas of South Africa have a shortage of copper in the soil, and some indications of a

copper deficiency in horses are a rough yellow coat, cracked hooves and mud fever in some cases. Inorganic copper, even in small quantities, is very toxic to horses, but herbs such as comfrey and rosehips are rich herbal sources of copper, and are not toxic at all if fed at recommended dosages.

Kelp is a rich source of vitamin C, iodine (which is essential for normal thyroid function – don't feed too much though!) and an incredible array of trace minerals and amino acids. For anaemia, feed nettles and rosehips, both are rich in iron and vitamin C, and vitamin C helps to increase the iron absorption rate. (Be sure to have the cause of the anaemia identified by your vet first, as large worm burdens or diseases such as biliary can cause anaemia, and these conditions need to be quickly and effectively treated). Fenugreek seed is rich in the fertility vitamin E, and has a chemical composition almost identical to that of cod-liver oil!

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If you need to give your horse a diuretic (eg for cystitis, windgalls, etc), there is no better choice than dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* – NOT the weed variety that commonly grows throughout paddocks in South Africa which can cause an irreversible stringhalt type lameness!) Other diuretics leach potassium out of the body, whereas dandelion is very rich in potassium, so it automatically replenishes what is taken out.

Herbs can be used in fresh, dried or tincture (extract) forms. Good quality dried herbs will retain their colour and scent – avoid dusty and dull looking dried herbs. Tincture extracts are excellent if you need to have almost immediate results, eg for calming purposes, as the alcohol extract is absorbed straight into the bloodstream. Squirt the tincture with a syringe directly onto the tongue. If the horse is going to be competing, evaporate the alcohol by adding the tincture to a little warm water in a spoon before drawing up into the syringe. For long-term use, herbs are far safer and more effective to use in their whole form (fresh or dried).



A selection of useful herbs for horses. Clockwise from the bottom are kelp, nettle, garlic flakes, comfrey leaf, fenugreek seed, rosehip and calendula petals

For horses, if you are feeding a single herb in dried form, a generally safe dose would be about 15 g. However, it is always recommended to check each individual herb's specific dosage rate, especially if you are planning to supplement it long-term. If feeding a blend of dried herbs, then a maximum dose of 30-50 g is sufficient. Dosage may be halved for ponies. Remember that if you are feeding more than one herbal blend simultaneously, halve the recommended dosage of each.

When used with a little knowledge, supplementing herbs to domesticated horses' diets is a natural and inexpensive way to help keep your horse disease resistant and in peak health. Fresh or dried herbs that are excellent for maintaining optimum health of the horse are: garlic, kelp, rosehips, fenugreek seed, comfrey, dandelion and nettle. The medicinal properties of these herbs and many others will be covered in future articles.

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