

A good stand of chamomile



Passiflora (Photo: Helen Lilienfeld)



Calming herbs

by Jenny van der Byl

Calming herbs work by restoring balance to the nervous system, and although very effective in helping horses to maintain their composure and level-headedness, they will not dull the senses or interfere with your horse's healthy reflexes.

In essence, calming aids do not replace good horsemanship and calming herbs are in no way a substitute for correct diet and proper training. If you are having a behavioural problem with your horse for which you cannot find the solution, it may be wise to seek advice from someone who has had years of experience.

Nervous behaviour is caused by stress, and very often horses will do much better emotionally and physiologically if they can live outside with herd companionship, free access to shelter, and constant access to hay or grazing, supplemented where necessary.

However, having said this, calming herbs can be a wonderful aid in many cases, such as for a horse that has been abused or nervous association created by a past accident. Hormonal

imbalance can also have a direct influence on temperament and behaviour. A course of calming herbs in combination with Chaste Tree berries, which have a hormonal normalising effect, can permanently alter entrenched aggressive behaviour for the better.

No horse needs to remain on calming herbs indefinitely. Three consecutive months should be more than enough to establish a good working relationship between horse and rider/handler, and rebalance the horse's nervous system. The only exception is some racehorses. While some will take it all in their stride, the hustle and bustle of a busy racing yard is just too much of a nervous stimuli for others.

The following are the most commonly used calming herbs for horses:

Chamomile

Horses that process their nerves through their gut, are prone to diarrhoea when anxious or excited, like when going to a show. A Chamomile type horse becomes very timid when going into new areas. He is uncertain, hanging back and preferring to follow a leader. They easily become anxious and uncertain when learning something new. They do well with a consistent rider who helps give the horse the courage it lacks.

Vervain

This herb is suitable for the typical Thoroughbred type who prefers jogging rather than walking, tossing the head, sweating up, spooking at the slightest rustle in the grass and are constantly "on their nerves". A Vervain type horse is said to process its nerves through the skin. They often have twitchy and ticklish skin that is sensitive to insect bites or other allergens. They respond well to creative and varied exercises, keeping their mind sufficiently busy. Trying to drill an exercise into a Vervain horse through repetition, will normally backfire. This horse thrives with a calm and creative rider who won't get annoyed with the constant fussing.

Valerian

This type of horse processes its nerves through the muscles. A Valerian horse can look calm while trotting, but the muscles can be bunching up underneath the saddle, with its teeth grinding the bit. When the Valerian's nerves finally get the better of him, it becomes very difficult to get the horse to settle down. A chronically affected Valerian type horse will tend to have very compacted, dry stools as a result of tension in the muscles of the stomach wall. Valerian suits them particularly well, as it is also a laxative. Valerian type horses need a competent rider with nerves of steel.

Hops

These horses process their nerves through their head. Their minds are constantly busy and they are easily distracted. It is difficult to teach them anything, and they don't easily retain what they have learnt. Hops helps to improve concentration levels.



The author on Princess (Photo: Helen Lilienfield)

Passiflora

There isn't a particular Passiflora type, but this herb helps to break negative ingrained behaviour and works synergistically with the other calming herbs.

Most horses will show up as a combination of two or three of these main types, although most horses will have a stronger tendency towards one or two of these types than any of the others. And don't forget the rider, whose nerves will obviously have a direct effect on the horse. If you are prone to show jitters, you can help keep your own nerves under control with a few drops of Rescue Remedy on your tongue and a couple of drops of lavender oil applied to your pulse points. SAH