

# A Guide to Safe Equine Herbal Feeding

By Claire C. Cox-Wilson



Today's trend toward natural horse care has made the use of herbal remedies more popular than ever. Unfortunately, in search for the "miracle cure," horse owners are displaying reckless and imprudent choices in their herbal feeding. More often than not, they are doing more harm than good. Sometimes they are even endangering their horses' lives.

Recently, a woman noticed her 24-year-old quarter horse was drinking and urinating excessively, but rather than call a veterinarian she decided to go the natural route. She fed her horse a "for the kidneys" herbal preparation containing 12 powdered herbs from a popular herbal company. The horse became very lethargic and started staggering and exhibiting muscle tremors. He continued to urinate excessively and then abruptly stopped drinking water altogether. As it turned out, three of the herbs in the preparation were powerful diuretics<sup>1</sup> and the horse became so dehydrated that the vet had to administer intravenous fluids. For 24 hours, it was uncertain if the horse would survive.

He was later diagnosed with Equine Cushing's Disease. A disease, which in its early stages, can sometimes be managed with the feeding of the herb chaste tree berry (*Vitex Agnus Castus*). However, as the condition progresses the most effective drug has proven to be pergolide mesylate. Unfortunately, while this horse owner's intentions were good, clearly she did not understand the power—and danger—of herbs

## **Feeding Herbs-A Serious Endeavor**

Feeding our horses herbs is a serious endeavor; you can fool yourself into believing that because herbs are natural, they are safe...not so. Many of our modern drugs come from herbs. For example, Digitalis, a drug used to stimulate the heart is derived from *foxglove*. Coumarol, an anti-clotting agent is derived from *sweet clover*. Aspirin comes from *white willow bark* and morphine from *papaver somniferum* (*poppy*).

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<sup>1</sup> A diuretic increases the flow of urine, which if not administered cautiously can cause severe electrolyte imbalances.

It is important to understand that herbs can sometimes do things that drugs can't, like adaptogens that balance the stress response; or do the same things only safer, like herbal pain relievers versus drugs with a narrow safety margin. On the other hand, there are no known herbal treatments that can match the safety and effectiveness of modern dewormers and antibiotics when you really need them. Most herbals marketed for liver disease are either mild liver toxins themselves, or designed to make the gallbladder contract - but horses don't have a gallbladder. Another erroneous belief is that herbs will enhance the color of a horse's coat and keep it from bleaching out. If a horse has a dull, bleached out looking coat the most probable cause is worm infestation or a mineral imbalance, such as a copper deficiency.

It is natural to want to feed our horse herbs, after all in the wild, horses have access to hundreds of herbs and plants. These are certainly more natural to the equine than the processed feeds we feed them. When fed responsibly and judiciously herbs can provide domesticated horses with the variety and health benefits their species enjoy in the wild.

### **Do Your Research**

Many horse owners will give their horse an herbal preparation, assuming that because the ingredients are natural they will not harm their horse.

But remember that herbs that are effective in treating a condition are by definition considered a drug. Like drugs, herbs have specific properties and actions, and in more cases than not, side effects.

Before feeding a horse any herbs, research each herb carefully.

It is a common misconception to assume that if a certain herb is safe for humans that it is also safe for horses.

- ) A perfect example of this is St. John's Wort ( *Hypericum perforatum*), a popular herb for managing stress in humans. However, it contains hypericin, which can be toxic to horses and most grazing animals. Horses can have a severe reaction, displaying symptoms of photosensitivity and peeling skin conditions, which often leads to a horse rubbing himself raw. A horse may suffer from loss of appetite, mild fever and diarrhea, display a staggering gait and act confused. In extreme cases, blindness can occur and the horse can go into a coma.
- ) Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) is another herb that can cause serious problems in the equine. This herb contains thiaminase, which can cause a thiamine deficiency in horses. Symptoms such as weakness, staggering, muscle problems and diarrhea can occur. Death can occur if left untreated. Even though, well-known herbalists and authors Catherine Bird and Hilary Page Self advise against the use of St. John's Wort and Horsetail, both of these herbs are used in herbal preparations for horses.
- ) Another extremely controversial herb is Black Walnut (*Juglans nigra*). It is a well known fact that when horses are bedded on wood shavings containing black

walnut shavings, clinical signs of laminitis (inflammation of the laminae in the hoof) can occur within 24 hours or less. Consumption of the shavings may cause signs of laminitis as well as mild colic. Affected horses become unwilling to move or have their feet picked up, are depressed, may exhibit limb edema and signs of laminitis. Difficulty in breathing (increased rate and depth) may be noted. Horses on pasture may show mild respiratory signs from pollen or fallen leaves. According to the Indiana Plants Poisonous to Livestock and Pets website (Cooperative Extension Service of Purdue University): “Reports are not clear concerning the safety of black walnut leaves in processed feeds. The bark and seed hulls are toxic, and these should never be incorporated into any feeds. In the interest of safety, any part of the black walnut plant should not be allowed to contaminate feeds.” It is also important to note that in the world of clinical research, infusions by nasal-gastric tube of black walnut extract are often used to create reversible symptoms of laminitis in horses in order to further the understanding of the disease. There are herbal companies that use black walnut in their preparations and there are herbalists who will tell you that if the black walnut is aged properly, it is safe. The question is...how can one be sure? If an herb is listed as toxic in any of my books or by a reputable source, such as a state university, I avoid using it.

For more information on herbs that are poisonous to horses, see the references at the end of this article.

During your research, you will run into inconsistent information about certain herbs. This is why it is so important to research an herb extensively in as many books and internet sources as possible. To make an informed choice, so that your horse always gets the best and safest treatment possible, try to find a vet that is familiar with both herbs and drugs, and can explain to you the pros and cons of both for your horse's situation. If possible, get the input of an equine herbalist, holistic practitioner or an equine nutritionist as well. Ultimately, as your horse's owner and guardian it is up to you to make sound decisions and safe choices for your horse.

### **Diagnosis First-Then Treatment**

It is important to know what you are dealing with before treating it. While there are many good herbal alternatives to most drugs, giving horse herbs for a medical condition can be dangerous if you do not have an accurate diagnosis.

Do not use herbal preparations in place of veterinary care. If your horse is exhibiting strange symptoms, do not assume an herbal preparation is the cure. You need to obtain a diagnosis first. Get a diagnosis from your veterinarian and then treat the cause. Sometimes finding a diagnosis can be as exasperating as treating the disease. If your veterinarian appears to be having problems arriving at a diagnosis, seek a second opinion. When you treat the symptoms of any human or equine condition without knowing the cause, it is a band-aid solution at best. In the case of herbal remedies, it might just be a toxic band-aid.

## **Read that label**

Several months ago, I was browsing through a neighborhood feed store and an attractive display of herbs caught my eye.

I picked up a bag, then another and another. There was no list of ingredients on any of the packages for these preparations. I was stunned; I put the fifth bag back on the shelf and started to walk away. A young sales clerk saw me and cheerfully remarked, "I've heard these herbs are absolutely great!"

"Really?" I challenged, "Why don't they list their ingredients, then?"

"They don't?" she picked up a package. "I think they list them on their website"

"Well, that doesn't help me much. I have a horse that is allergic to yucca," I countered.

"I wouldn't feed my horse anything without knowing the ingredients first."

That was pretty much the end of that conversation.

As a consumer, you have the *right* to know what you are buying.

## **Safe and Rewarding Herbal Feeding**

There is indeed something magical about herbs. Feeding your horse herbs can be rewarding and fun for you and your horse. I think that variety is something domesticated horses really miss & crave. The ideal setting would be to have our horses on 200 acres or more, where they could roam and pick their own herbs. Unfortunately, for most of us this is not an option. This is the main reason I feed my horses herbs. The benefit to this is that if you pick the herbs carefully you can also provide your horse with the vitamins, antioxidants and minerals they require for a healthier and happier existence.

For your convenience, at the end of this article, I have listed some of my favorite equine herbal books and most reliable herbal internet resources.

Keep in mind that most educational herbal internet sites focus on herbal use for humans.

Always use herbs safely and responsibly.

Your horse's well-being depends on you.

### **Guidelines When Shopping for an Herbal Preparation:**

#### **Is there a list of ingredients and are you familiar with every one of the herbs listed?**

Prior to feeding any herbs to your horse, always research the herbs in several different sources and if you find conflicting information, check with your veterinarian, herbalist or equine nutritionist.

#### **Are any of the herbs listed poisonous to horses?**

In addition, keep in mind that many herbs are not considered safe for pregnant horses.

#### **How many herbs are actually in the preparation?**

My late grandmother always taught me not to blend more than six herbs in a preparation. Too much of a good thing is not necessarily good, she would say. When herbs are combined a synergistic effect occurs which increases the properties of each herb. Mixing more than 6-7 herbs at a time can be risky in my opinion. It is similar to us taking too many medications at one time. Your doctor and pharmacist will warn you against this practice.

#### **Consult with a veterinarian, herbalist or holistic practitioner**

Some veterinarians are familiar with herbs and some are not. If your veterinarian is not comfortable advising you about herbal remedies, ask if they can recommend someone who is. Search the internet for homeopathic and holistic equine practitioners. Ask your friends for references.

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### References & Recommended Books

- Bird, C. (2002). *A Healthy Horse the Natural Way*. Connecticut: Globe Pequot Press.
- Kellon, Eleanor VMD, Equine Nutritional Solutions, PA. Personal Communication
- Self, H. P. (2004). *A Modern Horse Herbal*. Great Britain: Quiller Publishing Ltd.
- Self, H. P. (2005). *Veteran Horse Herbal*. Singapore: Kenilworth Press Ltd.
- Tilford, Mary L. Wulff & Gregory L. (1999). *All You Ever Wanted to Know About Herbs for Pets*. California: Bow Tie Press

### Informative Herbal Internet Sites

- <http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/mgmh.html>
- <http://www.speednetllc.com/djw/health/herb-med.htm>
- <http://www.umm.edu/altmed/index.htm>
- [http://www.dctor.com/pages/rightpages\\_wellnesscenter/dietandnutrition/nutritionguide/nutriguide\\_herbs.html](http://www.dctor.com/pages/rightpages_wellnesscenter/dietandnutrition/nutritionguide/nutriguide_herbs.html)

### Internet sites -Poisonous Herbs for Horses

- <http://www.manesandtailsorganization.org/toxic.html>
- <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/linn/Poisonous%20plants%20lstck.html>
- <http://www.meadowherbs.com/toxic.htm>
- [http://www.equinexpectations.com/HEALTH%20NEWS.htm#Indiana\\_Plants\\_Poisonous\\_to\\_Livestock\\_and\\_Pets](http://www.equinexpectations.com/HEALTH%20NEWS.htm#Indiana_Plants_Poisonous_to_Livestock_and_Pets)

### References to Black Walnut:

- <http://www.vet.purdue.edu/depts/addl/toxic/plant45.htm>
- [http://ohioline.osu.edu/b762/b762\\_25.html](http://ohioline.osu.edu/b762/b762_25.html)
- [http://www.equinecentre.unimelb.edu.au/health\\_nutraceuticals\\_toxicity.shtml](http://www.equinecentre.unimelb.edu.au/health_nutraceuticals_toxicity.shtml)
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez> (enter "black walnut +horse" in search box)

### About the Author

In her forty years of horse keeping, Claire Cox-Wilson has dealt with multiple feeding issues, arthritic horses, laminitis, Equine Cushing's Disease, Insulin Resistance, Iron overload, Navicular Syndrome and Polysaccharide Storage Myopathy (PSSM). "As a daughter of an Italian father and an Hispanic mother, I came by my herbal inclinations quite naturally. I grew up in a household where herbs were used frequently," says Cox-Wilson.

Claire, has been balancing equine diets for almost 10 years, in the past she made custom horsehair dreamcatchers and herbal blends for horses. She can be contacted through her website "Shotgun Equine Nutrition" : <http://www.shotgunranch.me/>