

Fencing Options for Horses

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Deciding on a fence is a major decision and a major investment for horse owners. The following considerations should be taken into account when deciding on a fencing system: planning, budget, safety, installation, containment, durability, and appearance. There is no ideal fence that is best for all horse owners or applications. Selection of appropriate fences will vary according to needs and uses around the farm or barn.

Planning. The best materials and intentions are worthless if the fencing system is not properly planned. Design a pasture and paddock system centralizing access to the barn, work areas, and feed storage systems. This will improve efficiency and management and will reduce labor and operating expenses. Also consider future expansion opportunities. Design fences with long term goals in mind so they do not have to be torn down and redesigned if expansion occurs. Gates should be placed near corners closest to the direction of travel. Gates should be large enough to allow equipment and several horses through at once. Avoid placing gates in low areas where water may pool. Dry lots, or sacrifice paddocks, provide an opportunity to move horses off the pasture during wet, dry, or times of pasture rest. Sacrifice paddocks can vary in size but should provide a minimum of 400 ft² per horse. The size should be increased proportionally as the number of horses increase.

Budget. A fence can be a major investment. In addition to the cost of materials, maintenance costs should also be considered. Some fences may have a high initial cost but a low maintenance cost. Conversely, some have a lower initial cost but a high maintenance cost. Owners should consider affordability both initially and in the long term and then choose the fence offering the best features within an acceptable price range. Quoting fence prices can be difficult: see Table 1 for different fences and cost maintenance estimates.

Safety. A properly installed and maintained fence should provide safety for horses and people. There are several factors to consider in fence safety. First, a horse has limited eyesight: a fence should be highly visible, especially to running or startled horses. Second, it must be solid enough to repel a running horse yet flexible enough to prevent injury. There should be no sharp edges (no barbed wire) or projections on the fence. There should be no spaces between boards, rails or wire big enough for a head or hoof to pass through but small enough that the head or hoof would be stuck. Right angles or 90° corners tend to increase injury potential compared to gradual turns.

Installation. Another factor is whether there is adequate time and expertise to save money by personally installing the fence or if a professional contractor should be hired. Improperly installed fences will be less effective with higher maintenance costs.

Containment. The priority of all fences is containment. Horse fencing should be tall enough to discourage jumping. Perimeter fences should be approximately 5 feet high while dividing fences should be at least 55 inches high. Appropriate fence heights will depend on horse breeds as well (i.e., warmbloods vs. ponies).

Durability. How long a fence lasts is a function of the type of material it is made of, the construction of the fence, the weather exposure it receives, the size and aggressiveness of horses contained, and how well the fence is maintained. Even good fences can fall into disrepair if problems are not identified and corrected in time. Crowded conditions in an overstocked pasture or paddock can lead to damage due to constant pushing on the fence. Weather conditions can play a critical role in choosing a fence material as well. Fences well suited for some climates may not be advisable in others. Check manufacturers recommendations, independent (i.e., University) product test results, and if possible, other horse owners who are currently using the fence. Also, keep in mind the difference between permanent and temporary fencing. Temporary fencing can be less expensive and laborious, but usually requires more frequent maintenance or replacement.

Appearance. The appearance of the fence should be the final consideration. An attractive and well maintained fence promotes pride in ownership, increases property value and gives an impression of professionalism. One approach would be to place more expensive, eye appealing fences in the well-traveled areas and less expensive fences in other areas. However, the more attractive fences must also be functional. Never let appearance alone lead you to choose a fence that doesn't meet your needs.

Table 1. *Common equine fence types, costs, longevity, and installation.*

Fence Type	Cost Estimate	Maintenance Estimate	Expected Life (in years)	Installation Labor Required
Wood (post/rail)	High	High	15-20	High
PVC (post/rail)	High	Low	20-30	High
Steel Pipe	High	Low	20-30	High
High Tension Wire	Moderate to Low*	Moderate	20	High to Moderate*
Electric Tape	Moderate to Low	Low	10	Low
Electric Wire	Low	Low	20-25	Moderate to Low

* Depends on post spacing.