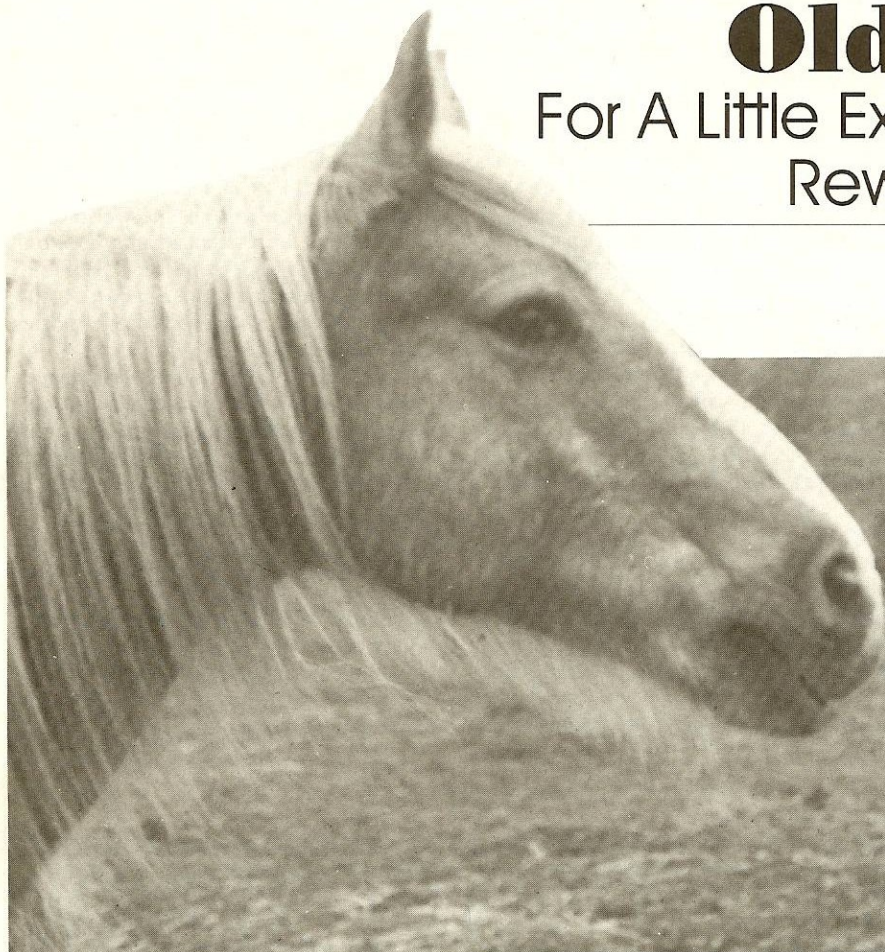


The Joy Of An Older Horse

For A Little Extra Work, You Are Rewarded With A Lot

By Kathleen Lark



Older horses are set in their ways, so accept the horse as he is. Learn from him instead of trying to teach him. Most important, keep him comfortable. (The photo is of Monkey, who is a happy, healthy, 27.)

You know the feeling. Mounted on a horse that really knows the ropes, you find he responds correctly to your aids, doesn't shy at the spooky things because he's seen them all before. The equine senior citizen can restore a rider's confidence, provide companionship, and teach more than a human instructor ever could.

Caring for a horse in his 20s (and even beyond) requires special dedication, but the rewards are well worth the effort. In a world obsessed with "perfect" bodies, the old horse often ends up turned out somewhere, retired. If he has lived a life of activity and human contact, it can be a very lonely and depressing retirement.

Taking on an aged equine as a personal horse is often an excellent alternative to spending enormous sums of money for a younger mount with comparable training, or spending the time necessary to bring a foal up and school it.

The older horse can also be a stabilizing addition to your barn of promising youngsters; not to mention the influence he can have on you when you want just to go for a relaxed trail

ride without any hassles.

Finding a good old horse is easy. Often, a special mount has spent some years in a string of school horses. He may be unable to put in four hours of lessons each day, but he is perfectly able to give you pleasurable trail rides and will work consistently in the arena while you polish your own riding skills with mounted exercises.

NEEDS AND REQUIREMENTS

The older horse may have some physical problems; certainly he will have limitations. Old, set splints, some side bone, a little arthritis, puffy fetlocks, and less than efficient teeth will not keep him from doing light work. In fact, staying active will improve his condition, physically and emotionally.

The older horse requires the same basics any horse needs—shelter, food, water, salt, exercise, worming, hoof care, and vaccinations. His tolerance for neglect of any of these necessities will be low.

As for shelter, he will need protection from all weather extremes. Shade from hot summer sun is essential. He will need an airy stall or shed to escape wind, driving rain, and bitter cold. He will need a clean, dry bed of straw or

shavings to encourage him to lie down and save his legs.

His diet must provide the roughage needed—through hay or pasture (quality) and concentrates to cover his energy demands. The older horse's digestion becomes less efficient, so he needs plenty of time after a meal before he exercises or works.

A grass/legume mixed hay is ideal for his ration, and the addition of a quart of wheat bran in his daily grain or pellets will aid digestion, mastication, and be a bit laxative. It is a good idea to dampen (even soak) all of his feed with water.

The older horse can be hard to keep weight on, and this is where a high-fat grain like corn is really useful. Do introduce a rich feed *gradually* to his diet and *always* cut his grain or pellets on idle days.

A "complete pellet" for horses is perfect for the equine whose teeth are poor, especially when it is soaked and made into a "mush." Rolled barley seems to be a better grain choice than oats—it appears to have a tonic effect on the kidneys.

Fresh, clean, cool water is the most important nutrient any horse receives, and it should be available at *all* times. The hot horse must

be cooled out before being put away.

Free choice salt must be provided.

The older horse will stiffen up quickly without some kind of daily exercise. If he can have free access to a paddock or field, he will keep himself moving. If he must be stalled all day, an hour of light work on the longe, under saddle, or even on a hot walker will suffice. (The hot walker is less than ideal because of the tight circle it makes, but is better than nothing.)

Careful worming every eight weeks, and trimming or shoeing at about the same interval are required. The older horse will need yearly boosters of his encephalomyelitis and tetanus vaccines, and influenza and rhino if he travels or comes in contact with horses that do.

GROOMING & HEALTH CARE

The older horse enjoys a thorough grooming. If his coat seems rough or dry, feeding a half cup of corn oil daily will help, and rubbing a lanolin rich oil into his skin is soothing.

His teeth should be checked every year and floated when they need it. The lower molars will form "points" on the inside; the upper molars will get sharp on the outsides.

If a touch of arthritis makes him stiff, you can feed yucca. We have found the capsules bought in health-food stores, two of them opened and the powder dropped into the evening grain, to be very effective without the adverse effects of using Bute regularly. But certainly, drugs that make an old horse's life easier are to be used—with good judgment.

We have found a clove of fresh garlic chopped into the grain daily will ease respiratory problems. You can even plant a little stand of alfalfa in a sunny spot to feed fresh to him.

A vitamin/mineral/micro-nutrient supplement is a good idea. At the least, he should receive yeast to provide extra B vitamins.

You may have to add extra padding under his saddle to protect a prominent spine and use a girth cover to prevent sores on less-resilient skin. Making him comfortable is just a matter of using common sense.

DO IT HIS WAY

The older horse will be "set in his ways;" past the age of 20, he will be next to impossible to change. You may have to make concessions and do things his way. If he cannot be cross-tied, just don't try to force it: tie him the way he is calm and comfortable. If he is terrified of clippers, trim him with blunt-end scissors—or leave him fuzzy—it just is not *that* important to remove hair. Only you can decide if you can live with his eccentricities.

If you choose to share your time with an older horse, it will be a rewarding experience. You will learn new and important things each day (no matter how advanced you are). You will also have the unequalled satisfaction of giving back a little of the pleasure that horses, on the whole, give to us all. ■