

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE BUILDING A FARM

by Vicky Moon

(Author of *The Middleburg Mystique*)

In order to start a horse farm from scratch you need to do your homework. There are many considerations: the land, fencing, barns, outer buildings and water. With any piece of property it is important to consider the number of functional acres. If, for example you have narrowed your choice to 30 acres, what portion of the 30 acres is functional? Before settling on the amount of acreage, make a list: how many horses and how many acres are needed to accommodate each horse? Generally one and a half to two acres per horse will suffice but in dry climates it needs to be more. And, if there are grass paddocks, it's necessary to allow for rotation of paddocks. Then, will the horses be turned out all day and night or only for a few hours each day? These are all questions of functional acreage, and it creates a significant disparity in the amount of acreage needed.

If the land is heavily wooded, it will need to be cleared and that translates into costs. According to Jacquie Dreyer, an agent specializing in horse farms with Armfield Miller and Ripley Real Estate in Middleburg, Virginia when buying raw land consider the location. "Are there other horse farms in the area," she asks, "or highways or risky conditions?" And then there is the concern with location and the availability of staff? Finding knowledgeable and qualified help is easier when other horse farms are in the area.

Another aspect is the terrain hilly or flat? Terrain differs dramatically from region to region. Rolling land is preferable to flat or hilly terrain. Rolling land offers several advantages for the horse: it drains better than flat land and good drainage in the paddocks is important for the health and safety of the horse. Poor drainage can lead to muddy paddocks. Muddy paddocks can become slippery causing injury from falls, pulled shoes and strained tendons. Poor drainage causes ice during the winter freezes. Rolling terrain provides natural exercise for the development of the horse up and down the hills. A steep terrain should also be avoided for many of the same health and safety reasons: it can be slippery, cause muscle strain not to mention potential for erosion.

The next consideration should be zoning and permitted uses, easements and future development planned? Are there environmental issues-wetlands, flood plains and presence of water? What about existing improvements such as buildings and utilities?

Finally, what about the climate? "Frequently new farm owners are captivated by a particular aspect of a site and fail to see the overall costs hidden in the development of a farm," says architect John Blackburn, whose Washington, D.C. firm Blackburn Architects specializes in horse farms. "There are expenses, like drain-

ing soggy fields, installation of fencing, or roads and bridges within the site." Add to this, culverts and utilities even before beginning the first building. The site costs can easily exceed the building costs. It is often advisable to have an initial site visit and consultation before buying the land. Prospective farm owners can do quite a bit of homework.

Make this list of things to do.

1. Check zoning classification-for the land and intended use. For example, farmland may be taxed as agricultural but does a horse farm fit into that classification? If there are plans for a staff residence, will local zoning permit it?
2. Check county soil maps and contact local agricultural extension services. Are there wetlands on the property and what are the restrictions for their preservation or removal? "Good pasture grasses are critical to the horse farm," says horse owner Anne Broward of Tampa, Florida. The land must support good grasses with a well-balanced soil. Consider how the land has been used historically? If it has been used for horses successfully then it's a good bet. Also, if it has been used for crops before, that's a plus, as well. However, a buyer should seek the advice of an expert for evaluation of the soil, and a property inspection for the presence of plants or trees that are toxic to horses (and dogs) and remove or isolate them from paddocks and pastures. "There are a lot of weird things growing in Florida that are difficult to identify," Broward adds. "I will never forget the time one horse got colic off a strange weed."
3. Go to tax office to investigate tax base.
4. Look at county offices for existing topography maps or aerial photos on file. "Surveys can be costly and if one exists it can save you a lot of money," says Snowden Clarke, a horse trainer and owner of Rock Ridge Farm in The Plains, Virginia.
5. Susan Katz, a farm owner in Hubbard, Ohio tells friends in search of a farm to "Read or subscribe to any and all local newspapers," she says, adding, "learn what is hap-

pening in that area. Is a new bypass planned? And what about a dreaded new Wal-Mart?" Study the long term growth of the area to determine if that is the direction of current growth, determine if highways are planned, is the overall project of the farm seem favorable to horses?

6. Look into the site plan approval process before you build? Are there other land restrictions such as building height, which is critical for large enclosed riding arenas? Will the land perk? Are wells required? Are public utilities available?

7. How will fire protection be handled? "If there is no public util-



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Continued from page 19

ity and no on site water source," Blackburn points out, "Will you be required to construct a holding tank?"

8. Are there local tack shops, blacksmiths, feed shops, hay for sale and vets close by?

9. Try to find out the real reason why the seller is selling the land. The next step would be to develop a site plan for paddocks, fencing, barns and outer buildings. (For this article we will assume there is an existing house somewhere on the property.) Again it is best to consult with an expert in fencing. If the property is located along highways, a second perimeter fence is a necessity for the safety for horses and liability for the owner (There was a report of one farm owner who had a horse get loose on a highway at night, it was struck by a car, the driver killed and the owner sued.)

Some may say that they know a local "expert" to help with fencing but according to Don Stewart, a professional horseman and nationally ranked hunter and jumper judge, who owns a farm in Ocala, Florida this can be a nightmare. "The problem with a local farm hand is he knows only what he has seen and even though he's seen a great deal he's probably not aware of the great many options. That farm hand may indeed know a lot about the health and safety issues," Stewart says, "but does he know how to solve them or better yet how to avoid them? Probably not." He adds, "The debate is three board fence or four board, wire or stone." The orientation of the barns is crucial there are many considerations. "Develop a concept design and then the outline specs for the major buildings," Blackburn advises this includes basic floor plans and a perspective of the barns and sheds. What "look" do you want?

And then consider the budget. Cost of the land: If the location is in the vicinity of intruding development, the land should increase in value. This could have a positive impact of the value of the farmland when you no longer want to use the land for horses. But, it could also have a negative value on the quality of life for those on the farm. How long do you anticipate living here? If planning a boarding stable with lessons and training then this could bring more customers with the location relative to suburban development and little riders. However, this could also be a risk to the health and safety of the horses. It could come in the form of curious trespassers wanting to see the pretty horses or it could be in the form of air and noise pollution that threaten the health of the horse, pastures and water.

Then when it finally comes down to building, one must evaluate the costs of different materials and the construction costs, which vary drastically around the country. The design goals have to be in sync with the budget. The most important issue when planning a horse farm or buying an existing farm is the health and safety of the horse. Efficiency and convenience are important factors but they are secondary. Do not compromise your desires for your new farm in order to accept something that exists, and doesn't meet your needs.

Finally, sit down and plan your farm on paper, and test it on the land you are considering buying. Seek and hire the experts. The expenses of searching for this advice, and doing your homework will be well worth the investment.



Continued on page 43