

Calming Herbs

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 fact, by helping horses to gain control of negative and overly emotional responses, the herbs help them to focus their attention on the job at hand and make use of themselves more proficiently.

Before continuing any further with this article, I cannot emphasize strongly enough that calming herbs are in NO WAY a substitute for correct diet and proper training. It's only common sense that if you feed your stabled horse a bucket full of high energy meal everyday and only hack out lightly a few times a week, you'll find your horse "bouncing off the walls"! And equally, if you are abusive and inconsistent in your training methods, you can only blame yourself for turning your poor horse into a nervous, jittering and unpredictable wreck! In essence, calming aids do not replace good horsemanship. If you are having a behavioral problem with your horse for which you cannot find the solution, it may be wise to seek advice from someone in your area who has had years of experience working with many different horses, and who consistently produces horses that are sound of mind and have enthusiasm for their work.

Nervous behaviour is caused by stress, and very often a more natural lifestyle can make all the difference to your horse's behaviour under saddle. Many horses will do much better emotionally and physiologically if they can live outside 24/7 with herd companionship (with free access to shelter) and with constant access to hay or grazing, supplemented where necessary with a low energy meal and herbs for general health maintenance.

However, having said this, calming herbs can be a wonderful aid in many cases, such as for a horse that has been rescued from an abusive owner, or nervous association created by memory of a past accident, or perhaps even an upset on the physiological level such as chemical stress all of which can play havoc with a horse's nervous reactions and general outlook on life. Hormonal imbalance too can have a direct influence on temperament and behaviour, and a course of calming herbs in combination with Chaste Tree berries (which have a hormonal normalizing effect), can permanently alter entrenched aggressive behaviour for the better.

No horse should need to remain on calming herbs indefinitely – they should not be needed for more than 3 consecutive months. This should be more than long enough to establish a good working relationship between horse and rider/handler, and rebalance the horse's nervous system. The only exception to this principle is some racehorses. Some Thoroughbreds will take it all in their stride, and may actually enjoy the ultra competitiveness of their lifestyle, but for others the regular gallops, races, high energy diet and general hustle and bustle of a busy racing yard is just too much of a constant nervous stimuli, which reinforces high-strung behaviour. These horses can end up fretting weight off, jumping around and getting themselves into a lather, and wearing themselves

out before the race has even begun. Look at the “Vervain” section below to see how this herb can help this type of horse.

The most commonly used calming herbs for horses are Chamomile, Vervain, Valerian, Passiflora and Hops:

1) Chamomile – for horses that process their nerves through their gut – they are prone to diarrhoea when anxious or excited e.g. when going to a show. Another strong characteristic of a “Chamomile” type horse is to become very timid when going into new areas, becoming very “sticky” against the leg and uncertain of themselves, hanging back and preferring to follow a leader. They also easily become anxious and uncertain when learning something new. In other words, they operate very well and consistently until taken out of their “comfort zone”. They usually do well with a brave and consistent rider who can help give the horse the courage it lacks. Once they have formed a good relationship with their rider they cope much better and are more willing to try new things.

2) Vervain – 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”. They are most likely to spook at the same object every time you pass it on a hack, no matter how many times they’ve already seen it. A “Vervain” type horse is said to process its nerves through the skin, and often have a twitchy and ticklish skin that is also sensitive to insect bites or other allergens. They respond well to creative and varied exercises in their schooling, which helps to keep their mind sufficiently busy that they forget about fretting! Trying to drill an exercise into a Vervain horse by, repeating it over and over again, will normally backfire. A Vervain type horse thrives with a calm and creative rider who won’t get annoyed with all the constant fussing.

3) Valerian – this type of horse processes its nerves through the muscles. A Valerian horse can look like he’s trotting around quite calmly, but the rider can feel the horse’s muscles bunching up underneath the saddle and the teeth grinding the bit. When the Valerian horse’s nerves finally get the better of him, he will most likely explode into a freestyle rodeo act, and once this has happened, it’s very difficult to get the horse to settle down again - he will most likely want to carry on bucking all the way home or for the rest of the schooling session. 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, so Valerian also suits them particularly well as it is also a laxative. Valerian type horses need a competent rider with nerves of steel! If you can get a “Valerian” type horse through it’s difficult phase and forge a good partnership, you’ll most likely end up with an amazing horse with awesome athletic capability!

4) Hops - these horses process their nerves through their head. Their minds are constantly busy and they are easily distracted. With their scattered minds it’s difficult to teach them anything, and they don’t easily retain what they have learnt. Think of Hops as Ritalin for horses!

5) 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.

You most likely will have noticed characteristics of your own horse in more than one of the above profiles, and that is absolutely normal, as many horses will show up as a combination of two or three of these main types. It's fairly rare for a horse to fall solely into one category, although most horses will have a stronger tendency towards one or two of these types than any of the others.

6) Don't forget the rider- the rider's nerves will obviously have a direct affect on the horse, so 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 Lavendar oil applied to your pulse points!