

So You Want to Buy a Horse...

Owning a horse can be extremely rewarding, but it is always a big commitment, requiring a large financial and time commitment. Here are the answers to a few questions that every prospective horse owner should ask, from how to pick the perfect pony to knowing the number to call if a problem should arise.

What should I look for when shopping for a horse?

It is important to remember that just like people, horses have pronounced personalities. When you set out to buy a horse, you need to find one that fits your individual personality. It is often useful to begin your search with the aid of a knowledgeable horseman. There are a lot of things to remember, and with the aid of someone well versed in horse buying, you will be free to focus on finding a well tempered horse that makes you feel comfortable and secure.

While horse “shopping,” pay attention to how the horse reacts around humans, and make sure to take a test ride. There are many important decisions that will affect the life of your horse that you and a professional horseman should discuss before you make any firm purchases. These topics include pasture space, feed requirements and your intended use of the horse. In addition, it is very important that you have a thorough pre-purchase examination done by a professional veterinarian.

Buying a horse is a little like buying a house. It can be a thrilling, rewarding experience, but it is important to remember that it is a long-term investment whose cost far exceeds the initial purchase price. Because of this, you want to take every step to ensure you pick out the right horse for you.

What are the necessities to keep a horse healthy and happy?

You have two options for housing your horse. The first option is to board your horse at a local stable or horse park. Some stables provide full-care options, in which your only responsibility as the owner is to visit and ride your horse. Other stables are less inclusive, requiring the owner to feed the horse and provide a clean environment. The second option is to house the horse yourself. In this situation, you must provide plentiful space for exercise and clean shelter in addition to the horse’s feeding and grooming needs.

A horse will need proper care from registered veterinarians and farriers (blacksmiths), proper equipment and a safe living environment. In addition to these responsibilities, the owner must be prepared to exercise a horse daily, provide it with plentiful food and treat it with kindness and respect.

What are the daily responsibilities of horse ownership?

Like raising a child, owning a horse is a never-ending responsibility. There are no “off days,” when taking care of a horse—an owner must clean out the stalls, provide food and general care for a horse 365 days a year, regardless of weather or vacation schedules.

One important thing to keep in mind is while the purchase of a horse is often motivated by a child’s request, maintaining a horse’s welfare can not solely fall on the part of the child. A horse can be a wonderful tool for learning responsibility, but owning a horse is a family project—everyone is involved.

The Financial Reality of Horse Ownership

The initial purchase price for a horse can range from a few hundred dollars to in the thousands! And once that step is complete, the costs don't stop.

Each day, you will need to provide your horse with plentiful food and water. Simply allowing your horse to eat the grass from his pasture is rarely adequate. You may have the wrong type of grass, or your grass may only be plentiful enough to feed a horse during the warmer months. Because of the shifting nature of the natural grass supply, you will need to supplement your horse's diet with hay and sweet grain that you purchase.

Your horse will also require regular care from a veterinarian and farrier. A healthy horse will require yearly veterinary upkeep that includes immunizations, teeth cleaning and general care. And while it is not necessary to shoe your horse, you can expect to see the farrier several times a year regardless. For unshod horses, a farrier is necessary to trim the horse's hooves, and a shod horse will require a farrier's care for shoe maintenance.

There are a wide range of items that will be additional necessary purchases to properly take care of your horse. You will need to purchase a halter and lead rope, bridle and harness and, if you plan to use your horse for riding, a saddle. These may all be purchased used, but if you decide to buy all new equipment for your horse, you can expect the cost to easily rise to the thousands.

This basic list does not include any incidental medical care or any of the many accessories and treats you are going to want to purchase to keep your horse happy. Of course, the costs run far beyond the money you invest—you must also invest your time, effort and care to successfully raising a horse.

I cannot afford to own a horse right now, but still want to have horses in my life. What are some activities I can do?

If you are not ready to make the financial and physical commitment of owning a horse, there are several options that will allow you to learn about and interact with horses on a regular basis. The first, and easiest option, is to arrange for lessons through a local horse park. This is an especially good first step for a child who is interested in horses. Lessons are more than just learning about how to ride; a stable with an established program will provide instruction in horse care and maintenance as well.

Leasing a horse can be a good intermediate step. Once you have signed the lease on the horse, you must take care of it as if you owned it. But if you then find that the commitment is too great, or simply does not fit into your lifestyle, you may return the horse to its owner and walk away without any guilt.

In addition to these two options, there are a wide variety of programs throughout the state that will allow you to learn more about horses, from volunteering at horse parks to becoming involved with local horse and showhorse clubs.

Helpful telephone numbers:

Georgia Department of Agriculture Equine Office 404-656-3713
Georgia Equine Rescue League 770-464-0138