

LIVING GREEN

There are many changes (large and small) that can make horse keeping more ecologically friendly. Here is how one family does it.

By Mary Daniels • Photos by Jake Moreland

Preserving the natural world is in the forefront of public awareness these days. Through the mass media, we can see the alarming consequences of mismanaged toxic waste, overpopulation (of horses and humans), depletion of our natural resources and more. This challenges each of us to “go green” by recycling or to become more “eco-friendly” in the products we use. It has made me wonder what I can contribute as a horse owner. I board my horses at a well-run farm where the hay is home-grown and the care excellent. As a retired journalist, I have been looking at horse properties, wondering what it would take to operate one while keeping a greener environment in mind. How could I offer my new warmblood filly a less toxic life?

I began by asking around. I went to dressage colleagues, barn owners, boarders and even equine veterinarians. What changes were they making? Some respondents said they now use only compact fluorescent bulbs in their barns; others were recycling all paper, glass and plastic; many were composting and spreading manure, rather than having a waste management firm take it to the dump. Eventually, I went to the bulletin board of the local tack shop and found a business card for a horse farm in nearby Kankakee, Illinois. The salesclerk told me the place was “all-organic.” I called owner Nikki Smith, who agreed to a visit.

A Tour of the Smith Horse Company

Cruising up the drive of the Smith Horse Company provides no obvious clues to a green bent. The barn appears charmingly custommade, and I enjoy the sight of contented horses basking in the sunshine in their paddocks. Smith gives me a warm welcome and my tour begins. She says her barn is multi-discipline and that she practices dressage daily on her hunter. Dressage applies to all disciplines, she tells me firmly. When I ask her what impelled her to be green, she says she was raised that way. “My mom always instilled in me the idea of taking care of the animals and the earth. You know, pick up litter that blew into the forest, save the kitten, rescue the lost dog, help the neighbor.” Concern for the environment has been a natural progression for her. “Then, I had children and, wanting a beautiful earth for them, I started to do a little more—most importantly, teaching my children, so it becomes second nature to them,” she says.

The main goal of the Smith Horse Company is to “provide a holistic, natural path of nutritional care, management and training, while showing horses as athletes on a competitive

WITH HORSES



The Smith Horse Company (from left): Abby Smith, Colton Smith, Mallory Glazik, Brad and Nikki Smith with dogs Aubrey May and George. Chuckles the horse looks on.

level,” says Smith formally. To accomplish her goal, she did lots of research and attended seminars, workshops and clinics, all for the better care of the horse. As she applied her newfound knowledge to her own horses, she noticed “our horses always had a willing attitude, a beautiful shine to them and a life-giving gleam in their eyes.” This farm is her dream. “I was able to implement all of what I believe, studied and knew was true.” Here’s how she does it:

Use Recycled Materials

Once inside the buildings, I see how using recycled materials can have amazing results, both aesthetic and functional.

For example, the indoor arena—70 feet wide by 130 feet long—is airy and light but different somehow. I notice that the off-white walls are composed of 30-by-60-inch sections that each have curious small black indentations in one corner. Then it dawns on me: These are computer desktops. Yes, says Smith. Saved from the landfill and made of the same laminated surface as kitchen countertops, they are easy to clean. The little black squares are the small openings for the computers’ electrical cords.

Next, I notice that the colonial-style windows are each slightly different in size and shape. “Somebody purchased

new windows for an addition to a house that was never built,” says Smith. “They put an ad in the local paper to sell the windows, and we purchased them. People are so anxious to buy new things. We try to look at it differently.” But, she admits she has a secret weapon. It helps that her husband, Brad (affectionately dubbed “Martha Stewart”), and her father-in-law, Ruben (the owner of R&R Construction Company) are men of vision. “They can look at objects and materials no one else wants and find a use for them,” she says.

I had to ask about the cost of





Stall boards came from an old ranch. Hot water is pumped through tubing in the concrete floors (inset) for efficient heat. Recycled windows and computer desktops line the indoor.



recycling. “There is the cost of acquiring items, the cost of taking the items down, the cost of trucking the items to your destination, the cost of putting it back together and the possible cost of renting a storage pod,” she says. “Plus, we always pay for our labor. Still, sometimes the savings (over buying new materials) can

be significant—sometimes 40 percent.”

To find recyclable materials, Smith scours newspaper ads, visits auction sites and goes to estate sales. Many of these finds are giveaways—free. The main cost is carting them away. “The big benefit comes if you have somewhere to store it until you can use it,” she says.

The main barn of 13 stalls faces north and south and has a stylish contemporary feeling as well as an aesthetic charm. Antique furniture and wall decorations in the barn’s small foyer add to the effect. A new addition of six stalls is planned, using wood from the theatrical stage of a nearby school

GREEN EQUESTRIAN COMMUNITIES

Some planned equestrian communities are finding eco-consciousness through a new sense of how to develop and manage the land. Janie Coffey of the 1,200-acre Saddle Ridge (saddleridgefl.com) development near Sebring, Florida, says, “People move from light to dark green. We have a list of suggestions and try to be a resource center for people to make the transition.” For example, before building, the soil is tested for its nutritional components. Owners receive this report along with advice from the University of Florida’s agricultural extension office on what to add to provide the best pasture for their horses. Coffey says the community’s 24-stall barn will be made of renewable, recycled and sustainable materials and oriented for maximize air circulation.

Energy-efficient homes are certified by the Florida Green Building Coalition (FGBC), a non-profit organization whose mission is “to provide a statewide green building program with environmental and economic benefits.” The FGBC rates homes using a point system and connects homeowners to county and state incentive programs for building and energy conservation. Coffey says the FGBC provides advice on solar panels, low-energy lighting, windows, plumbing fixtures, appliances, building materials, landscaping and more (floridagreenbuilding.org).

Even trails and roads within the community were carefully planned to meet the stringent FGBC guidelines. “When planning the easements, there is a challenge to have wildlife buffers within the community so that natural native animals and plants are retained, protected and allowed to thrive,” says Coffey. “For ex-

ample, we worked hard to retain some of the old grandfather oaks that have hanging Spanish moss and are a part of the natural beauty of this area. We also had a challenge in creating roads that would accommodate horse trailers, which are much taller and squarer than cars and SUVs. While the trails are elevated to minimize standing water, they were graded naturally; no fake footing was added.”

Coffey says that building green is not a trend. “I think it is a permanent shift in the way society looks at things, such as environmental issues. A lot of mainstream people are coming into the realm of what used to be considered fringe.” In the planning stages are a dressage arena and a hunter-jumper field. “We are discipline-neutral, so you can meet people from different backgrounds. It is all for the love of horses.”—*Anya Crane*

that is being demolished. The indoor arena is on the south end, positioned—after a study of how the wind blows and the sun rises and sets—for maximum natural exposure to light. “Even when it is 20 below, the stalls still get some sun,” Smith says. Hot water pumped through tubing in the concrete aisle floors provides radiant heating, which uses relatively little electricity compared to forced-air systems. On top, the concrete blocks have a circle pattern that breaks up the visual monotony and gives traction. The barn’s walls are double insulated as defense against rough Midwestern winters.

Other barn recyclables include expensive looking industrial style lighting fixtures from a defunct Ponderosa steak house, otherwise headed for the trash heap. Stalls have old-fashioned, horse-proof, extra-thick stall boards rescued from an old ranch. The boards were originally unattractive but, after being disinfected, scraped, washed and repainted (with a safe oil-based, lead-free paint), they have that fashionably distressed look. The old ranch also provided three large metal grates, which Smith uses as see-through stall dividers. The more socially inclined horses love them, she says. “It is all a matter of imagining how something will look when it’s clean. As a rule of thumb, I am always thinking, *What if a horse chews on it?*” To that end, she advises passing on old wood decking because it contains arsenic, which is poisonous to horses and dogs.

Ample storage is one aspect of her barn that is truly different from many. Feed, tack and other necessities have plenty of room in an area adjacent to the east end of the building. In its previous life, Smith says, this big storage and tack room was a building slated for demolition. On the south end of this storage area is a large viewing area with a place for making coffee and eating snacks. The sliding glass doors and large windows came from a house that burned down.

Use Eco-Friendly Chemicals

Sitting on rescued furniture in the viewing room, our talk focuses on how to reduce chemical impact on a horse facility. Combating flies during Midwestern summers can turn into major warfare, so Smith orders fly predators—tiny wasps that eat fly larvae. She also plants flowers and herbs, such as chives, basil and marigolds, by the barn, which also help keep the fly population down. They are safe snacking for horses, too. “Everyone here uses organic fly spray,” she says. These are based on flowers and herbs, such as marigolds, citronella and eucalyptus, and contain no harsh chemicals.

Topping the list of environmental concerns at any barn is manure disposal. Smith composts her manure and then spreads it on her hay field as fertilizer. “Our compost is in wind rows. We stack piles three to five feet high with a front-end loader. It needs airflow, so we do not stack it tight. We try to keep it about 130 to 160 degrees in the middle of the pile. That destroys unwanted pathogens. If it gets hotter than 160 degrees, it kills the good microbes. After about 21 days and around 145 degrees, we turn it. We spread it on our field about twice a year, depending on the soil test.” She says that some communities may insist on carting it away.

Smith says she is fortunate to be able to grow her own hay and oats. “They are as organic as they can be and are for our own use. No chemicals are used on our oats.” She pays a farmer to plant the initial field and to cut and bale. “We have the soil tested by Midwest Laboratories. They advise us on what to do to keep it healthy. If needed, we add food-grade minerals to keep the ground healthy for growing hay and oats. This year, they advised us to spread our compost on the field. We did not need the food-grade fertilizer.”

Smith vaccinates, but does the minimum. She uses alternative medicine when it is an option. “We do a lot of

GREEN: THE NEW RURALISM

Jennifer Donovan says that “a new ruralism is growing in popularity among people with the desire to live in a less contrived way in open spaces where they can reconnect with nature.” Her company, Equestrian Services in Charlottesville, Virginia (equestrianservicesllc.com), designs and manages equestrian amenities for resorts and communities. Some are “branded” with the signature of equestrian luminaries, such as Olympic eventing gold medalist David O’Connor and Western trainer John Lyons. The 348 acres of The Oaks of Lake City in Florida is just such a community (theoakslakecity.com). Donovan says, “Probably most important [sustainable practice] is the preservation of open space. We’re losing access to open trails at an alarming rate.” Choosing the right location is half the battle. “Former farmland is the most appropriate,” she says. Proper site selection also includes examining topography and doing as little grading as possible. “We must think of rain and drainage and channeling water via swails. Preventing erosion is key.”

When building, Donovan says they consider the sun, topography and wind to heat and cool efficiently. “Initially, it was about being energy-efficient. Now, it is more holistic, evolving to being ‘green.’ We encourage conservation and awareness. For example, you can become ‘dark-sky compliant,’ which means minimizing outdoor lighting so you can see the stars at night. We encourage composting. After a heavy rain, we don’t turn the horses out until the pastures are dry enough for traffic. We use bridges to avoid going through streams and also close the trails after rain to minimize impact. We avoid chemicals and use fly predators. To minimize dust and, thus, minimize respiratory issues in the horses, arenas and barns are separated and hay is stored in a separate building and brought into the barn as needed. We use stall cushions that go under the bedding and low-dust bedding. Being green is not doing any one thing,” she says. “There is so much to do that it can be overwhelming, so if you just do one or two things, that’s a step in the right direction.”—*Anya Crane*

aromatherapy and a lot of homeopathics, such as Traumeel®, for leg problems. But, if a horse is colicking, I’ll reach for the Banamine.”

While some green horsekeepers use herbal wormers, Smith prefers Ivermectin twice a year, even though it can be harmful to earthworms, beetles and microorganisms when passed in horse manure. “I have seen the damage in untreated horses from worm infestation. The drug’s highest concentration in the manure is during the first 48 hours after worming, so we dispose of that manure separately. The daily wormer we use is not harmful and has no adverse effect on earthworms, beetles and microbes. The manure is considered clean and safe for the

compost pile.”

Be A Green Horsekeeper

Alternative materials have to be easy and economical, Smith says, describing herself as a middle-of-the-road green horsekeeper. “It is almost as though there are two extremes among horse people regarding being eco-friendly—the really radical, whom I admire but can’t emulate, and the ‘I don’t care’ group. I’m glad a lot more are coming down the middle.” For example, Smith has experimented with just about every kind of bedding. “I’ve learned from my mistakes. Recycled newspaper blew everywhere. The stalls were pigsties,” she says. “We’re using a recycled pelleted wood bedding right now, which is easy

13 MORE WAYS TO BE GREEN

1. Check labels and use products that are biodegradable and won't pollute water sources.
2. Turn off the water while you are lathering shampoo on your horse.
3. Replace standard incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs. Turn lights off when not in use.
4. At the barn, only use plastic that can be recycled. Or, use paper bags, which can be recycled.
5. Carpool to the barn and other horse events. Make sure your vehicle is well-maintained—engine tuned up, air and fuel filters replaced every 12,000 miles and oil and oil filter changed every 3,000 miles or so. Keep tires properly inflated.
6. Carry a reusable water bottle for yourself, instead of buying a new bottle of water each day.
7. Educate yourself on what is in your horse's feed and supplements and look for natural components.
8. Investigate natural bedding for your horse's stall. Straw, shavings and pine pellets compost well along with manure.
9. Buy at local businesses. It keeps them afloat and minimizes your gas consumption.
10. Have the soil tested at an agricultural extension office to see what improvements your pasture needs.
11. Birds, such as swallows and bats, eat flying insects and can reduce them in and around the barn. Attract swallows using nest cups or nest boxes; invite bats by installing a bat house. Predators (small wasps that eat fly larvae) keep flies down.
12. Composting manure is ideal, but you can also have a roll-off container on site for filling and periodic pick-up.
13. To learn more about being a green horsekeeper, go to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education (SARE) program online at sare.org.

to clean. It is compressed wood turned into a pelleted form, a byproduct of the wood industry. We put it into the compost pile, it breaks down easily and we can spread it on our hay field."

Smith offers encouraging advice for getting started. "Little steps are all it takes. After all, we are just managers of this land and what's in it. Especially with a boarding and lesson barn, I feel

there comes a great responsibility to the children that learn from us. So, we must give all our knowledge to them and try to do by example, as they are the next horse masters." 