

Lifeline extension

Experts offer advice to get more out of farm fencing

EXCERPT BY CYNTHIA MCFARLAND

FENCING RANKS high on the list of ongoing expenses for most farm owners. The freestyle exercise machine and the swimming pond may be considered optional, but safe fencing is a necessity on any horse operation.

While there are numerous types of horse fencing on the market, most Thoroughbred farms opt for either four-board wood fencing, non-climb wire with a top-board, or a combination of the two styles. With no drop in sight for lumber prices, farm owners are looking for ways to make fencing last as long as possible.

With the right materials and proper maintenance, a good fence can last—and look good—for many years. Experts offered opinions on just how to get the most lifespan out of wood and wire fences.

Chose carefully

Starting with the right materials in the first place goes a long way.

Posts are the foundation of any fence, so do not skimp on quality. For horse fencing, four to five inches is the minimum diameter one should use, and larger posts are needed for corners, gates, and stud paddocks.

For routine pasture fencing, seven-foot long posts are usually suitable, but when building stallion enclosures, or any paddock where horses will have much contact with the fence, it is best to use eight-foot long posts. The more post in the ground, the stronger the fence. Experts recommend setting posts at least 30 inches deep.

Set posts on eight-foot centers for strength and to accommodate a top board, if using wire. Although there is no law against putting up untreated wood, fencing contractors always recommend using pressure-treated posts and boards (see sidebar) so fencing will last as long as possible. Treated wood is identified by a plastic tag stapled to the end of the board or post.

“If there’s moisture in the wood, the treatment can’t push the moisture out,” said Bill Waggener, of Waggener Brothers Fence (www.waggenerbrothers.com) in Ocala. “That’s why you want to buy from a reputable company that will make sure their wood is properly dried before being treated.”

Although treated wood typically comes with a warranty, this is voided if the post is cut off, notched, or drilled. Waggener explains that treatment does not reach all the way to the core of the post, so cutting into it will expose untreated wood and the post is then vulnerable to rotting or insect damage.

Some fence crews use chain saws to cut boards, but Waggener’s crews use circular saws.

“We cut every thing with a circular saw because you get a smoother, more precise cut, with no gouge in the posts and less kick back when sawing, said Waggener, who has been in the fence building business for more than 25 years. “It slows us down a little, but it’s safer and gives a prettier finish. When board ends are square, they butt up together better.”

Waggener prefers hand nailing as opposed to an air gun.

“My preference is a galvanized, maize screw shank nail 3-1/2 inches long, which is made for treated wood,” he said. “A nail gun can over-drive or under-drive and uses too small a nail. I haven’t found a nail gun that will do it properly.”

Some customers still prefer lumber treated with creosote and Waggener has found this greatly discourages horses from chewing the wood. He also recommends using domestic wood, which may be pine or poplar, depending on your area.

“Some people have used imported boards from South America,” Waggener said. “It’s a softer wood without much resin to it, so it’s cheaper and lighter, but the horses thought of it as candy.”

When putting up any type of wire fence, take note of the grade of the wire, Waggener said.

“Class 3 galvanized wire fencing is a slight cost increase, but a better grade of wire,” said Waggener, who also recommends class 3 double-barb fencing staples that are 1 1/2 inches long. The extra expense for higher grade wire and staples is not great, “but it makes an absolute difference in how long the fence lasts,” he added.

“If it’s installed properly, wire fencing should stay tight for the lifetime of the posts,” Waggener said. “The right bracing system is the main thing with a wire fence. You want to make sure the wire is pulled tight and braced properly.”

Staples are made to hold the wire against the post, but not to hold the pressure of the wire, so that is why you need it properly braced. The wire must be wrapped all around the end posts and tied into itself. Otherwise, when the posts get old, the only things holding the tension are the staples.

SIDEBAR

Pressure-treated lumber

It is common knowledge that pressure-treated wood lasts longer than wood that has not been treated, but what exactly is “treated” lumber?

In order to preserve the wood, a process called pressure treatment introduces chemical preservatives into the lumber in an enclosed vat or cylinder. Vacuum and pressure literally force the chemicals into the wood, offering protection against decay and damage from insects, including termites.

There are several preservatives used for the pressure-treating process. Treated wood identified as CCA, ACA, and ACZA all contain inorganic arsenic, but there are alternatives on the market. ACQ and CBA are both arsenic-free, pressure-treated lumber in which the chemical preservatives are free of arsenic and other EPA-listed hazardous compounds.

Certain precautions should be followed when using treated lumber for fencing or any building project. Installers should wear gloves when handling wood, and use protective goggles and a dust mask when operating a saw. Sawdust and wood debris should be cleaned up and removed from the job site. Scraps and leftover treated wood should not be burned, either inside or outside, as toxic chemicals can be released.

Never use treated lumber for projects where the wood will come in contact with human food, animal feed, or drinking water.—*Cynthia McFarland*

CUTLINE:

Be wary of buying inexpensive boards as they may be made of inferior imported wood, which can make “horse candy” out of your fencing. Experts also urge purchasing treated wood from a reputable dealer