

Be A Guest... Not A Pest

by Juli S. Thorson

The people who have become successful enough with horses to actually own and manage a breeding farm are often the envy of the rest of us. We see their ads and fantasize about what it must be like to be around horses all day, never having to commute to that 9 to 5 job.

Seldom do we realize that we - the dreamers, lookers and potential customers - can be such a headache to a breeding farm's owners that our desk jobs begin to look good to them. Any number of farm owners will tell you that dealing with visitors, especially inconsiderate visitors, is the worst part of their occupation.

Nearly all breeding farms are managed by people living on the same property as the horses, and the rub between manager and visitor occurs when the visitor forgets he is a guest as well as a potential customer. For some reason, visitors often forget that a horse standing to the public is not on public property.

The following tips, suggested by a breeding farm owner, may help reduce the aggravation unwittingly caused by some farm visitors.

- Don't be a drop-in guest. Phone prior to your visit, even if you are only five minutes away. No one likes to be surprised in the shower or ankle deep in stall cleaning. If your plans change, call back and let the farm know.

- Stop at the house or office. If you go directly to the barn, your hosts may not know you've arrived.

- Wait for an attendant. Even if you have been at the farm before or have a mare there, don't tour the barns or pastures on your own. Think how you'd feel if a previous guest took friends on a tour of your house when you weren't there.

- "Gee, did I wake you?" Farm owners do try to keep regular sleeping hours. Make your visits and phone calls after 7 a.m. and before 8 p.m. When phoning a farm a great distance away, check for time zone changes.

- Park in designated parking areas. If you park in a driveway or trailer turnaround area, you'll inconvenience the workers.

- Make your visit short. Breeding and foaling season is the farm's busiest and most trying time. The activities mean extra chores, phone calls, visitors, paperwork, repairs and lost sleep. Horse owners love to get together and talk about their favorite subject, and it's all too easy to lose track of time and stay too long at the farm.

- Stay away from the breeding area unless invited there. The breeding process is a private one for the horses as well as for the handlers, and can also be dangerous to spectators. Don't ask to see the process. The breeding area is also not the proper place for the sex education of children.

- Don't interrupt the veterinarian. If the farm vet is in attendance, it's best to leave for an hour or two. The vet's schedule shouldn't be interrupted by persons asking for free advice, especially during the artificial insemination process, when several mares must be handled in a short time.

- Don't smoke. Visitors shouldn't need to be reminded not to smoke in barns or around flammable materials, but many don't stop to think of the fire hazard. Cigarette butts and papers (and beverage cans) belong in trash containers, not on the ground.

- Do not handle any of the horses. The horses will be shown upon request. Stallion noses aren't for petting; stroking that velvety muzzle is a good way to get bitten.

- Keep children and pets under control. Children are attracted to hay stacks, stairways, machinery and foals, all of which are potentially dangerous. Don't get so engrossed in your visit that you lose track of the kids. As for dogs, leave them in your vehicle, or better yet, leave them home.

- Keep doors and gates closed. Don't open any stall door or gate without permission, and remember to relatch any you've opened. Stay out of tack rooms or veterinary labs.

- Ask permission before snapping photos of the farm's horses. New foals are excellent photo subjects, but aged stallions tend to lose their show ring brilliance and accumulate bumps and scrapes. The stallion owner may prefer to give you a more complimentary photo or flier of the stallion. Others will be happy to have you take photos, so ask first.

- Refrain from gossip. It is a stallion owner's unwritten law to keep from discussing the faults of another person's stallion; don't try to involve your host in a critical review of someone else's horse.

- Be cautious when inquiring about price. Most horses are for sale, but ask the price only if you are truly interested in buying, not for general information. It is poor manners to ask how much a farm has paid for a horse.

- Accept refreshments, but don't be too critical about the housekeeping. At many farms, the outside chores are shared by husband and wife, leaving little time for housework. Don't be too surprised if the barn's cleaner than the house!

The next time you visit a farm, remember to be a good guest. You'll help make the owner or manager's life as idyllic as you imagine it to be. □