

Barns Really Are for People, Not Horses by Bonnie Martin

Marble floor in the entry foyer, a bronze statue of a horse as the central focal point, tongue and groove wooden walls (some covered with mirrors), hanging baskets of ferns above polished brass railings, and an indoor swimming pool off to a room on the side. Sounds like some kind of mansion, doesn't it? Well, in a way it is, but built here in Georgia to house horses owned by Kenny Rogers back in the 1980's.

In contrast, picture a barn at the other end of the spectrum—a simple building with no frills, maybe not even four walls. Which would you prefer? Which do you think your horse would want?

It may come as a shock to many people, but horses don't really care about fancy and expensive housing, or any housing at all usually. As long as they are safe and comfortable that is all that matters to them. Things that impress people don't mean anything to a horse.

If horses are kept as nature intended, in groups, outdoors, without air conditioning, heating, blankets, or body clipping they are perfectly comfortable even in weather we might not enjoy. Their bodies are designed to be comfortable in cool temperatures, and their coats fluff up to insulate them from the cold. Given a choice of in or out, most horses will choose out, even in cold weather. The main exception for most horses would be a combination of cold and wet.

My grandfather's horses, raised outside, had access to a barn year round, but the only times they went in on their own were on really cold, windy, sleety days, and even then only some of the time. The rest of the time they chose to stay outside.

Think about it—a horse kept inside cannot move around and exercise to warm its muscles. It can't investigate things that arouse its curiosity or move away from things it is afraid of. In a barn, the horse is a captive. Kept inside for hours and hours at a time, many horses develop vices such as cribbing, wood chewing, weaving, stall pacing, or at the very least become very bored. Some develop physical problems due to the inactivity. We certainly wouldn't do too well in a small room for the majority of our days, so why should we expect our horses to be ok with it? And how can we expect them

to come out of forced inactivity, be ridden and have the stamina and behavior we want them to have?

Barns are for people and their convenience. It's easier to have immediate access to our horses if they are right at hand and easy to catch. The horses are cleaner by not having found a favorite dirt or mud spot in which to roll. Their coats, manes, and tails don't get sun bleached and that makes them look prettier to us. Some horses get used to a barn and may even seek it out for safety and comfort once they are used to it, but if a horse is raised outside where it can move around, it probably won't choose to stay inside.

Barns give us a place to store feed, hay, and tack. Some barns provide us a place to lounge and socialize with friends. Barns can be a status symbol for humans because humans care about that kind of thing. Horses don't. So if all you provide for your horse is a place to get out of bad weather, and you don't trap them inside, you can rest assured that your horses are better off physically and mentally than ones kept in fancy or not so fancy jails. And you get the added benefit of not having barn chores!