

Draft Horses on the Farm

Draft horse power, that is. Learn about the draft horses that can help you around the farm.

By Carol Ekarius

About the Author:

Carol Ekarius is a contributing editor to HF and author of several small-farming books, including *Small-Scale Livestock Farming* (Storey Books). Long before there were names like John Deere and Kubota, there were names like Belgian, Clydesdale and Percheron. Animal power had been used for hundreds of years, but during the 19th century, these great horses came into their own, powering a growing nation. Draft horses provided transportation in cities, they helped to build an ever-growing network of railroads, and in agriculture, with new and improved technology—like the iron plow, the McCormick reaper, threshing machines and grain drills—they allowed a farm family to cultivate hundreds of acres of land. By the end of the 19th century, farms would often have 10 or more heavy horses, each working, on average, 600 hours per year. As the 19th century drew to a close, there were over 27,000 purebred drafts, and over 13 million working horses around the country, most with some draft-horse blood bred in for size and might.

The heyday for draft horses was relatively short lived: During World War I, draft horses (and mules) were employed to transport supplies, ammunition and artillery to the front. Of 182,000 draft animals the Americans took with them when they entered the war in 1917, only 200 returned home. To add to their decline, by the 1930s, electric motors and gasoline engines virtually replaced the draft horse in transportation and greatly reduced their numbers in agriculture.

As GIs returned from World War II, there were fewer than 2,000 registered draft horses left in the country, and the future of these hard-working equines looked bleak: Many breed associations ceased operations, and some breeds, like the Suffolk Punch, bordered on the brink of extinction. The 1950s was an especially desperate time for the big breeds, with numbers dropping to all-time lows (as evidenced by the Percherons, with only 58 registrations in 1954, compared to about 3,000 per year at the beginning of the century).

However, in the 1960s and '70s, small farmers and hobbyists began viewing working horses with renewed interest, and today, draft horses, from the native American Creams to the mighty Shires, still offer something for small farmers. They're big, they're beautiful, they can pull their own weight and as Darrell Van de Hoef, a part-time farmer with 50 acres in Zeeland, Mich., says, "There is something special about sitting on a plow, feeling the power of the horses and listening to the roots snapping off as the plowshare hits them; you can hear the dirt sliding over the plow and the birds singing. Those are experiences you just don't get with a tractor." Van de Hoef laughs, "That probably sounds half romantic, and I'm not really the romantic type, but to me that's the biggest reason for farming with horses."

AROUND THE FARM

When one thinks of draft horses, the monsters, like the Clydesdales, at 18 hands, and Shires, at 19 hands, come to mind, but not all working horses are giants; some, like the Norwegian Fjords or the Haflingers (both about 14 hands), are small but stocky animals that are capable of hard work.

In field and forest, the smaller, working equines supply traction, without causing compaction of the soil. They are often seen at special events pulling beautiful carriages and carts, or plying town and city streets, giving tourists a relaxing way to see the sights. And many small-scale farmers are finding them useful as part of agritourism operations.

David Lynch is a good example of a farmer who has found opportunity and advantage by incorporating draft horses into his operation. He owns Guidestone Farm, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) operation near Loveland, Colo., which supplies raw milk to members (members purchase shares in the dairy herd of 10 Jersey cows), and produces meat and eggs. He is also agricultural director of The Stewardship Community, a nonprofit organization associated with Guidestone that's dedicated to "providing education in sustainable living skills and teaching where food comes from and what it takes to produce it."

He uses his three horses, Ike (a Belgian/Clydesdale cross), and Jack and Jake (a team of Belgians), to work in fields and to provide an agritourism component that helps fulfill both the educational mission of the nonprofit and the marketing needs. During special events and school programs, like the pumpkin harvest, visitors are transported around the farm on horse-drawn wagons, thus offering a wonderful experience that helps attract hundreds of visitors to the farm each year. These visitors afford an important income stream, helping the farm to be profitable.

With 150 acres, Lynch still uses tractors for many operations, but he says, "There are some activities we do with horses that I think are simply better for the soil. For example, we have a six-acre vegetable garden, and all of the seeding for cover crops is done with the team, because pulling a heavy-duty seed drill with a big tractor compacts the soil. The horses have an array of niche jobs in the farm program that only they perform."

NOT JUST FOR WORK The Place To Go

Horse Progress Days is the only trade show in the world focusing on newly designed and manufactured horse-powered farming and logging equipment.

See the equipment demonstrated on a variety of breeds of draft horses and mules, some working in the field, and some presented in a parade of breeds. From singles to 12-up hitches, they demonstrate plowing, hay making, planting and many other farm-related activities.

The 2004 event will be held July 1-2 in Middlebury, Ind. For more information, visit www.ruralheritage.com/progress. But the great thing about draft horses is that they aren't limited to pulling a plow or a wagon; they can be ridden western or English, with a fair number found in show rings, competing in halter, conformation, dressage or hunter/jumper classes.

Shine Hill Peanut is a Percheron stallion with a logging background who has now entered the world of competition. Professional horsewoman, Dani Schacht, is his current owner. "I'd seen some draft horse/Thoroughbred crosses and I thought I'd really like to have one, because the cross gives the horse a more relaxed attitude, plus they're much bigger in build, and they're denser in bone," says Schacht.

"I went to see Peanut when he was available as a stud. I really liked him, but I didn't end up breeding my mare to him at the time. Soon after, Peanut's owner became ill and couldn't care for all his horses. He remembered me, and how much I liked his stallion, so he sold Peanut and a mare to me.

Schacht quickly discovered what many draft horse aficionados already knew: "They're surprisingly easy to ride, most of them are laid back in their temperament—compared to a Thoroughbred they're a piece of cake. They are very smart, very quick learners, and always willing."

Peanut was jumping cross rails within a couple of weeks after he was broke to ride, and Schacht started showing him within a year. In his first trial, he placed third overall, competing in hunter/jumper, dressage and combined classes.

"When I first started taking him to shows, people pretty much looked at me like, 'Is this woman crazy?' They couldn't believe his size, much less what I was doing with him." But the skeptics changed their tune when Peanut finished second in the cross-country field, and received a 75 percent score on dressage, which is quite impressive for a training level horse.

DRAFT BREEDS

American Cream Draft

American Creams were developed in Iowa in the early years of the 20th century. A medium-sized draft horse, they were bred for farm work. They have a rich cream color, white mane and tail, pink skin and amber-colored eyes. The breed association formed in 1944 with about 40 breeders, but by the 1950s the breed appeared doomed. Yet a very small group of farmers kept breeding and farming with Creams, and in 1982 they restarted the association with help from the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC). Today, over 30 breeders participate in the association, and contribute to keeping this "good dispositioned, willing to work" draft horse breed alive, which is listed as critically threatened by the ALBC.

Belgian Draft

As its name implies, the Belgians were developed in Belgium. Although an American breed association formed in 1887, it wasn't until 1903—when the Belgian government sent an exhibit of horses to the St. Louis World's Fair and the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago—that the breed really began building strong acceptance in the United States. Until World War I, breeders continued actively importing stallions, but as war raged in Europe, American breeders had to confine their breeding programs to native-born stock, thus developing an American strain. Belgians are now the most numerous draft breed in the country. They are primarily chestnut or sorrel, with snow-white manes and tails, a white strip in the face, and four white socks, though they occasionally throw a roan or a bay.

Clydesdale

Thanks to Anheuser-Busch using a team of Clydesdales to pull its famous Budweiser hitch, these large draft horses that

originated in Scotland are probably the most recognizable draft breed in the country. The most common color in the Clydesdale breed is bay, but they also throw black, brown, chestnut and roan. The preferred markings are four white socks to the knees and hocks, and a well-defined blaze or bald face.

Irish Draught

Irish Draught horses were traditionally a dual-purpose horse, working during the week on the farm, and then participating in the hunt on the weekend, giving the breed a head start as a show animal. They come in a wide variety of solid colors, and are a medium-sized animal with good action.

Percheron Tall, Dark and Handsome

Texas is home to short, stout stock horses ... and the World's tallest horse. Goliath, an 11-year-old Percheron gelding, owned by Priefert Manufacturing in Mt. Pleasant, Texas, towers at 19.1 hands (that's 6'5") and tips the scales at 2,400 lbs. But it's his height—not his girth—that landed him in the Guinness Book of World Records last July.

Percherons derive their name from the small French district of La Perche, southeast of Normandy. They're thought to be one of the first draft breeds to come to America, and remained the most numerous until surpassed by the Belgians after World War I. They are large horses, and are usually black or grey, but there are sorrels, bays and roans as well. They are still widely used by farmers and loggers.

Shire

The Shires are the largest draft breed, with stallions reaching 19 hands. They are handsome animals that originated early in England (they were there when Julius Caesar invaded), and were imported to the United States in large numbers during the mid 1800s. Generally black, with white markings, Shires are making a comeback, doing well in the show ring, as well as at work.

Suffolk Punch

Suffolk Punches were truly bred to be a farmer's workhorse, known for their great pulling power. The first Suffolks were imported from England in the 1880s, but never caught on in the United States like some of the other breeds, in part because of limited importations. In spite of that, the breed—another critically threatened breed according to ALBC—has received renewed interest, with over 60 breeders around the country working to keep it alive.

GETTING STARTED

"I learned how to shear sheep from a video," says David Lynch. "I would never, ever, do that again. I did learn the hard way and the sheep learned the hard way. Now if I were going to do it again, I would go get training from someone who knew what they were doing. Finding a mentor for working with horses is even more important than for shearing sheep. Don't do it by trial and error: There is too much at stake."

Darrell Van de Hoef agrees, "The old standard advice is, get next to a horse farmer, because there's so much you need to know that you are only going to learn from somebody who's doing it. Find an old-timer and pick his brain clean."

For first-time buyers, consider purchasing a well-trained, older team; these animals can teach you as you begin the journey from novice to accomplished teamster. Experienced teamsters also recommend that you buy your first horses from a private party who will mentor you closely, or seek the help of an experienced teamster in selecting your first horses if you plan to attend a sale barn or auction. "You can get real lucky, or you can get a real disaster-in-waiting at a sale barn," Van de Hoef says. "An experienced hand will help you make the right choice."

This article first appeared in the March/April 2004 issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local newsstand or tack and feed store. [Click Here](#) to subscribe to HF.