

Make Mine Mules

If you live to ride and like to stand out in a crowd, try a mule! For riding or for your hobby farm, mules can do anything horses can do (and often better).

By Sue Weaver

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Do you love to compete in equine competitions?

Then consider this: Mules can be shown at standard horse shows and dressage and driving events, but they're also eligible to compete at hundreds of donkey and mule specialty shows staged in North America every year.

Mule shows include classes as diverse as: commonplace pleasure and speed events

Or as esoteric as: Coon jumping (mules jump a tall hurdle from a dead standstill) Snigging (ground-driven mules weave through pylons while dragging a log) Mule pulling contests (teams of brawny draft mules drag a heavily loaded sledge a prescribed number of feet)

Surefooted, steady mules also excel at trail riding, be it for pleasure or in sanctioned competitive and endurance events.

The one thing mules don't normally do: Reproduce.

This is because they are hybrids sired by jacks (male donkeys), while their mamas are mares (female horses).

Courtesy Mattrick Family

Snowy, a donkey jack or a mule's father, makes friends with young Graham. Snowy shares the Mattrick Family's small New Hampshire farm with a flock of Shetland sheep, a dozen chickens and other critters. Mule Factoids Although Judaic law prohibits the breeding of mules, the ancient Hebrews bought and used them extensively. Mules are frequently referred to in the Old Testament of the Bible, particularly as the mounts of nobles and kings. Many ancient authors including Homer, Xenophon, Columella, Aristotle and Pliny the Elder rhapsodized about mules in their writings. Mule races were part of the Olympic Games around 500 B.C. Our first President, George Washington, is the father of the American mule. He so admired mules that imported two fine jacks, Royal Gift and Knight of Malta, to sire mules for his estate at Mount Vernon. Between the Civil War and World War II, Army mules were an integral part of America's military forces. In 1922 the American mule population peaked at 5,918,000 head; in the 1960's it dipped to a record low of about 10,000. Top When a stallion (male horse) breeds a jenny (female donkey) their offspring is known as a hinny. Hinnies are rare but just as satisfying to ride or drive as mules.

To see what a mule can do: Visit the website of mule extraordinaire: John Henry (<http://john.henry.org>). We think you'll be surprised!

Now, let's learn more about mules.

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Mule Shapes & Sizes

Mules come in innumerable shapes and sizes, so there's a mule just right for you. There are: Wee miniature mules (the offspring of miniature donkey jacks and miniature horse mares) Burly draft mules as much as 18 hands tall Half Thoroughbred or Quarter Horse racing mules And even easy-gaited mules that never jar your bones when you ride them.

And mules come in every color of the equine clan.

A Mule for Your Hobby Farm

Because mules are so versatile, a good mule may be your ideal hobby farm equine. But don't rush out to buy a mule before doing your homework.

Get to Know Mules Before You Buy

Mules are unusually intelligent members of the equine clan.

Because they are so smart and they quickly learn the bad along with the good, mules are like the little girl with the little curl: Most are very, very good but a few are horrid.

Meet some mules before you buy one. Join a donkey and mule club (the American Donkey and Mule Society will send you a list of organizations in your locale) View training videos or read a book Attend mule shows or a mule day celebration Subscribe to one or more of the friendly mule-oriented email lists at YahooGroups Ask questions (lots of questions) and Understand mule psychology before you buy one.

Mule psychology? Yes indeed. Mules don't perceive the world through a horse's eyes. For a peek into the mule's mind, visit the Every Cowgirl's Dream and Lucky Three Ranch.

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Buy From a Reputable Mule Breeder

When you're ready for a mule buy a good one. Problem mules frequently find their way to sales barns and traders' yards--avoid them. Instead, investigate mules offered by reputable mule breeders and trainers.

More on Mules

- American Donkey and Mule Society
- American Gaited Mule Association
- American Miniature Mule Society

YahooGroups on Mules

Mules Only

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/MulesOnly/>

Atlantic Coast Mule Lovers

<http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/ACML/>

Donkey Mule Info

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/DonkeyMuleInfo/>

Longears

<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Longears/> Arrange to visit the mules you like in person and if you aren't equine-savvy, take along a friend who is.

Ride the mules before you commit and if the mule you choose is guaranteed, be sure to get it in writing.

Mule Care Tips

Once you've chosen your perfect mule you've purchased a friend for life.

Mules are long-lived and tend to stay sound well into old age.

Upkeep is much the same as for horses although mules are often easier keepers that require lower-protein feed than comparable-size horses.

Mules are wise; they rarely rush around and injure themselves in the manner of flighty horses.

However, when veterinary intervention is required there are a few basic differences between horses and mules.

Read about them in “Donkey and Mule Scenarios; When to Stop, Think, Read or Call”, downloadable for free.

Think mules. Once you’ve tried one, we think you’ll be hooked. Make your next hobby farm equine a mule!

Sue Weaver is an HF contributing editor and long-time hobby farmer.

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