

## The Proper Disposal of Deceased Horses

By: Laurie A. Cerny

The death of a horse and the proper disposal of their body is not something most horse owners want to think about.

But whether it's a planned euthanasia - as with the case of an old horse, or a horse that is injured or terminally ill, death is not just a reality of horse ownership, it's a probability.

Lynn Applegate, DVM and owner of Equine Health Service in Kalamazoo, MI tries to encourage her clients to have a plan for either a sudden death of a horse or a planned euthanasia.

"Horse owners don't want to believe it [the death of their horse] is ever going to happen," Applegate said. "It's important to know that at some point an animal can injure themselves or colic, and colic is the number one killer of horses."

With senior horses, who are failing, Applegate recommends putting the animal down before winter. "Pick a nice day in the fall and a nice soft place outside," she said. "It [euthanizing] is a very hard decision to make but it's your vet's job to make it as comfortable as possible."

For horses being buried on the property Applegate suggests the euthanasia take place away from the burial hole. "I've had horses fall into the hole and I've had to crawl down and euthanize them there." Doing so made it more traumatic for both the horse and the owner, as well as for herself.

"I don't want the ending to be scary and really horrible for the horse," Applegate said. For this reason she gives a mild sedative before administering the Pentobarbital Sodium (euthanizing drug).

"It [the sedation] relaxes the animal so they go down easily. There's no falling over and no panic in their eyes," Applegate said.

Once a horse is deceased then its owner faces the task of disposing of their body – whether it's done by burial, cremation, or rendering.

For Pat McGee, who lives in Watervliet, MI, options for disposal have varied during her 50 years of owning and breeding Quarter Horses.

When her pony and its foal died she buried them on her family's farm. "As a young adult burying them was how I felt," McGee said.

Over the years she has buried two horses and has had a rendering service pick up five others.

"Each time it happens your feelings are different." McGee said as an adult with the demands of work and family, as well as living closer to other homes, her choices became more about practicality.

"My attitude and my maturity has changed." she said. "When you have 100 acres you have the option to bury. Before I had an option [on the family farm] to bury. But once I moved where there was less acreage my options have been more limited."

McGee has had positive experiences with using a rendering service, which picks up in her area. She said it costs around \$150 and you don't even have to be home when they come. "One of the renderers even sent me a sympathy card," she added.

Cremation is another option for horse owners, although it's the most expensive service.

According to Kim Widmayer, family services director at Sleepy Hollow Pet Cemetery in Byron Center, MI, private cremation runs about \$1,500. With the private service the horse is cremated and cremains are returned to the owner in an urn. Less costly is a memorial group burial where the cremation is individual and the horse's cremains are buried in a group grave in their cemetery. The cost is \$625.

With her own horses Widmayer has done both burial and cremation.

Although it's always nice to bury your animal on your own property, she warns horse owners to think about their feelings should they move elsewhere. That's what happened with the first horse she buried. "When you have a horse a good portion of your life it was like leaving a part of your life behind," Widmayer said.

More recently she cremated one of her horses that lived to be 33 years old. "Right now he's in my bedroom in an urn." Widmayer said she will eventually bury his cremains next to his mother, who is buried on her farm.

Keeping a memento from your horse - like its halter, one of its shoes, or a lock of its mane, or tail, is also a common practice.

Widmayer said with her last horse she always played with his forelock, so she took a clipping of it. "I still have it; keeping something is part of the grieving process." She added, "It [death] is tough whether it's a horse, a dog, or a cat."

As part of their cremation service Sleepy Hollow makes a hoof print of the horse in clay and gives it to the owner. They also take a clipping from their tail and have it made into a key chain memento.

#### **Here are some additional tips:**

- Know what services are available in your area for rendering, cremation, and burial. Keep in mind that most renderers have certain days of the week when they service an area.
- You also need to know what kind of accessibility is needed for the removal of your animal. Most services will need an open area to pick the horse up and will not remove them from stalls or small corrals. Renderers also require that shoes are removed.
- Many veterinary schools like Michigan State University offer both euthanasia (you have to haul the horse there) and cremation services.
- Know what the burial requirements are for your township and state - like much land do you have to have to bury livestock, and how deep does the horse need to be buried?
- Make sure family and friends know what your wishes are for your horses. Should you be out-of-town and a horse suddenly dies most state laws only allow 24-48 hours for the disposal of the body. Have phone numbers available for your disposal options.
- If you are within sight of a residential area make sure the animal is tarped until it is removed.
- The Humane Society of America offers a state directory of equine carcass disposal services, as well as an overview of laws for disposal and burial of livestock at [www.humanesociety.org/animals/horses/facts/humane\\_horse\\_remains\\_disposal.html](http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/horses/facts/humane_horse_remains_disposal.html)