

Horse Camping: Containing Your Horse

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You're sitting under the stars around the campfire eating and relaxing with friends after a long day horseback trail riding. Your camp is all set, the tent is up, sleeping bag is unrolled, and your horses are...where ARE your horses?

If you've always wanted to camp with your horses, but are worried about where and how you will keep them safely contained when you're not on them, there are several horse containment options for horse camping. Choosing the type of containment you will use depends on where you camp and your horse. Proper preparation with any of these containment options is the key to keeping your horses safe and in camp with you.

So, how do you decide if you will use a portable corral, a portable electric corral, hobbles, picket lines, or a highline?

First of all, determine where you are camping:

Camping at a trail head or by your horse trailer requires a different containment than camping on the trail. At the trail head, where there may be other campers, vehicles and horses, you probably want a portable corral with panels that attach to your trailer to keep your horses safe and close to you. Sometimes, if you're lucky, the trailhead has corrals available.

Camping on the trail requires that you educate yourself about the rules and regulations for the area in which you are riding and camping. There may be limitations on grazing and stock containment. Depending on where you are riding, you can generally get that information from the landowner or public land officials such as a forest ranger. After learning about any rules and laws regarding horse camping, you then can decide what allowed containment option works best for you and your horse.

Next, you need to decide what works best for YOUR horse. This requires proper preparation and experimentation:

Grazing hobbles are an excellent option for your horse in areas where grazing is allowed, but it is vital to your horse's safety and comfort to accustom them to hobbles prior to using them on the trail. You want your horse to be calm (sometimes a little feed helps) and in a small corral or pen when you first try on hobbles. Give the hobbles a tug after you put them on your horse, so he knows they are there and then give him a chance to try them out. It's best to repeat this trial a few times and if you can, try them out in larger pastures prior to using hobbles on the trail. If you are new to hobbles, know that there are different types and some are meant to make a horse stand still, while the grazing hobbles, usually attached with a chain, allow them to move and graze. Using a horse bell in conjunction with hobbles is a good way to give yourself peace of mind on the trail, but be sure to prepare your horse with the bell as well.

Picket lines also allow your horse to graze in a limited area. Using a picket stake with your line allows you to put your horse in an open area, so you can avoid tree damage. You can picket by a foot with one hobble or attach the picket line to your halter. Preparing your horse at home will let you know what works best. Again, start in a small corral or pasture.

First, attach the picket line and let your horse drag it until he/she is used to it. Then drive the stake straight into the ground, so it won't pull out. Lead your horse to the end of the line the first time and then let them graze. Again, it's best to repeat this trial a few times prior to heading out on the trail. Horses sometimes tangle themselves in the line even if they are experienced on a picket line, so you need to check on them often and you may want to use the picket line just for grazing during daylight hours and use a highline at night. On the trail, try to place the picket stake where the line will not get hung up on rocks, logs or trees to protect your horse and the environment. Also, if you camp in one place for an extended time, be sure to move your picket often enough to prevent overgrazing and lower the impact on the environment.

Highlines are a good option for containment, and can be used in conjunction with hobbles or a picket line. When tied to a highline, horses can walk around in a circle, lie down and even roll. For feeding, you can give them enough lead rope to get their heads to the ground, as long as you are close by to keep an eye on them. At night or when left unattended, you will want to shorten the leads to prevent the horse from being able to get a leg over the rope. A highline can be hung from tree to tree using tree saver straps. A good option is to let your horses graze (if grazing is allowed) using hobbles or a picket line during daylight hours and put them on the highline during the night. If you are strictly using the highline, you can also use standing hobbles to prevent your horse from pawing. Again, practicing at home is a good idea. Highline kits usually accommodate about four horses, so you can prepare more than one horse. Ride or work your horses enough to get them a little tired (like they would be after a day on the trail), make sure they are fed and watered sufficiently to make them content, and tie them on a short lead to the highline for a short period (30 minutes) at first and then work up to longer time periods.

Portable electric corrals are another choice for the trail. Electric fence kits that operate off batteries and are made specifically for the trail work great. Just make sure you practice setting up the corral at home and your horse is used to an electric fence.

Practice and experimentation at home with these different containment options is extremely important to preparing your horse and you for a safe and fun horse camping adventure. Some other things to consider when you are camping on the trail are:

Don't turn all your horses loose on hobbles at the same time.

Some can be tied to the highline while the other hobbled horses graze and when the hobbled horses are sufficiently fed, you can

swap. If you have three horses, leave two tied while one grazes, because tying just one may make the tied horse nervous if he thinks his companions might be leaving. If you have a dominant, leader horse to whom the other horses are very attached, that horse may need to stay on a the picket line or the highline. Know your horses and know the other horses your companions are riding.

It's a very good idea to let your horses get safely acquainted with the other horses in your group prior to camping on the trail, preferably with a safe sturdy fence or panel between them where they have room to get away from each other if necessary.

Sandy Gagnon of Montana University had some good advice at a recent MSU Equine Conference. An MSU Extension Equine Specialist, Gagnon teaches packing courses and a wilderness ecology course at MSU. He advised setting up camp between the grazing area and trail head to make it easier to detect horses trying to go home. Horses, however, should stay far enough away from camp so flies won't be a problem.