

Small Budget, Big Impact

By Mary Flood

We've all seen the gorgeous, immaculately kept farms of such equine meccas as Lexington, KY., and Middleburg, VA. Every fence is freshly painted. The pastures are perfectly mowed and the gardens expertly tended. As farm owners and managers, we often lack the budget to support that level of landscaping. Still, with a little work and perhaps some part-time help, we can keep our farms appealing, safe and professional.

10 Steps to a Gold Medal Appearance

Mary and Ted Flood own Wildfire Farm, a small dressage training facility in Lovettsville, VA. A U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF)-certified instructor (through Fourth Level) and USDF Gold Medalist, Mary also has a passion for gardening.

"I have enjoyed flowers and gardening ever since I was little," she says. "I have fond memories of helping my grandfather plant flowers all around his house. And my dad had a perfect, weed-free vegetable garden that provided us with food all season long."

Mary's interest in aesthetics and harmony inspired her desire for natural beauty around the farm. Starting from scratch 17 years ago, the Floods created a property that is now a Certified Wildlife Habitat. Mary offers these tips for keeping your farm looking beautiful on a budget.

1. Visual impact is important. With a little effort, you can beautify your barn with planted flowers. Remember to dress up the farm entrance, too. The entrance serves both aesthetic and practical purposes; it should be inviting, easily accessible for cars and trailers, and organized in its layout. Keep safety, convenience, visibility, and comfort in mind.
2. Keep everything clean and in its place. Maintain fencing in good repair, and paint your gates and fences regularly.
3. Keep landscaping simple. Clients like to escape their hectic daily grind and relax in a friendly environment that is pleasing to the eye. Provide benches where they can sit and enjoy being at your barn.
4. Plant trees for shade. Some well-placed shade trees give relief in the summer, and evergreens, such as blue spruce, add visual impact in the winter.
5. Plant flowerbeds around your barn with slow-growing shrubs like boxwood, disease-resistant knockout roses, and dwarf blue spruce. Mary uses permanent plants for the landscaping foundation to provide structure, even in winter.

6. Plant hardy, easy-care perennials like daylilies, irises, and daisies to create a low-maintenance landscape. Avoid plants that are poisonous to horses, like daylilies, irises, and daisies to create a low-maintenance landscape. Avoid plants that are poisonous to horses, like yew.
7. Choose plants that grow well in your area. For many places, annuals like impatiens or marigolds offer seasonal color. Install raised flowerbeds edged in stone or railroad ties, which make boundary to keep horses from tromping on the beds.
8. Mulch well. Mulch holds moisture and reduces weeding. A ground cloth under the mulch further helps control weeds.
9. Put wall planters outside your stall windows. Pansies look nice in the spring, and low-maintenance geraniums add a splash of color during summer. Urns or other attractive containers at the barn entrance can be planted with annuals, which give color all summer. Mary uses dwarf English boxwood in planters on either side of her outdoor ring. The horses don't like the taste, so the boxwood remain chomp-free.
10. Lay out your barn so it is organized and efficient to run. Mary hides her sawdust bin and spreader as much as possible, while keeping them close enough to the barn to be convenient. For aesthetics, she hides the manure spreader, and the ramp to it, behind a small privacy fence.

It does take time and effort to keep a place looking nice, particularly in the spring and summer months. When not teaching or riding, Mary spends much of her time working around her property.

A Professional Perspective

“When building a new facility or upgrading a current one, think of your fence, barn and structures as part of the landscape, and lay out your decision accordingly,” says Donavon Corum, RLA, AICP, LEED AP, owner of Design Core Studio, a landscape architecture firm with experience in equestrian design. All elements on your property play to its aesthetics.

As someone drives down the road to your farm, the first thing they often see is the fence. That makes your fence an important part of the landscape. Make sure it's both appealing and reassuringly secure. Then, establish an entrance sequence. When you drive into the farm, find the focal points, and put planting beds at the terminus of those focal points. Corum agrees with Mary Flood to highlight the barn, which is easily done with potted plants and flower boxes.

When selecting your plants, Corum suggests those that are low maintenance, such as ornamental grasses. For guidance, you might consult your local nursery to find plants that do well in your area. Additionally, USA Gardener

(www.usagardener.com) contains growing information on more than 120 annuals and perennials, along with useful information on planning a garden, composting, and tips for growing flowers, vegetables, herbs, and fruits. Be sure to contact your local extension agent to find out what plants are poisonous to horses. With some thought and planning, you can add wonderful touches that make your farm an inviting, safe and enjoyable environment for horses and their humans.