

# Grooming Solutions for Horses Make Great Gifts for People

by Thomas N. Tweeten, Ph.D.

The holiday season is quickly approaching. In mid-November I attended a Holiday Horse Market in Wisconsin Dells. The many attendees spent time looking for items to get for their horses or their horse-loving children. I want to share some thoughts that you may want to consider as you select your horse-related gifts. For this discussion I want to focus on horse-care products such as cleaners, conditioners and polishes. Having grooming solutions that contribute to the comfort of the horse is key to maintaining a horse that is happy to have you around beyond feeding time.

Once again, at our training barn I have two groom boxes. One consists of grooming products with which I am experimenting. This is a rather large, cluttered box with many different types of solutions that I am trying to see what really will work for the good of the horse. The second is a much smaller, neater groom box with grooming products that I use when I am working with my training horses and I really want to focus on communicating

with the horse and building trust. I would like to share with you what I think is important to have in that box.

In general, select grooming products that are designed specifically for horses and have ingredients listed on the container. Choose products with fragrances that work for the horse. For example, apple or peppermint fragrances are very pleasant or relaxing but may lead to annoying habits such as chewing or biting between horses.



● **Shampoos** — Select a gentle product. It is desirable to have pH adjusted in the range of 5 to 7. More basic shampoos tend to swell the hair, causing it to take longer to dry. Higher levels of fragrances can cause irritation to the eyes and sensitive skin. Use a medicated product, with veterinarian advice, for a horse with skin problems.



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Color enhancing shampoos should not be used on a regular basis. Excessive use of whitening shampoos can cause a white horse to develop a blue, silver, or even green cast. Body wash shampoos tend to contain higher levels of moisturizers and conditioners, avoiding the need for crème rinses. Shampoos that are low sudsing will still clean but will more easily be rinsed out.

● **Rinseless Shampoos and Spot Removers** — These products are developed to help clean dirty or stained areas. They are an excellent alternative to shampooing, especially in colder weather conditions. These rinseless shampoos contain surfactants that can also help give a pleasant shine to the horse.



● **Crème Rinses/Mane-Tail Detanglers** — This group of products is used to condition the hair and make it easier to “pick-out” manes and tails. Crème rinses are used after shampooing, especially in manes and tails. They must be rinsed out after they have been worked into the hair. On the other hand, detanglers typically are leave-in, making them more preferable for use on horses. There are a range of detanglers commercially available. I prefer to use a detangler that does not leave waxy or oily residues but with enough conditioner to prevent tangling of manes and tails. Waxy or oily residues will attract dust and filth that contribute to tail rubbing. Heavy silicone residues can eventually dry the hair.

● **Hair and Skin Moisturizers** — Moisturizers are the workhorse in my grooming box. I prefer to use a product that is natural, has a light, horse-compatible fragrance and does not leave a residue that attracts dust or filth. They can be used to help keep the hair soft, reduce static electricity when grooming, and soften the natural body oil, the sebum, which can then be worked out onto the hair with grooming tools.



● **Coat Polish** — Polishes are used to give the coat a shine. In addition, they can often be used to detangle manes and tails. These include silicone sprays, light mineral oils, vegetable oils, and modified plant-derived materials containing silicones. The heavier silicone polymers and oils leave residues that can collect dust. Silicone-based sprays can dry the hair, making it feel “strawy” and leave the saddle area slippery. They can also make it more difficult for the hair to wick the sweat away from the body of a warm horse. I prefer to use one of the recently introduced leave-in coat finishers that give the coat a soft, natural feel and a deep shine without drying it out or feeling too slippery. In addition, the horse will cool down quicker.

● **Hoof Dressing/Packing** — These materials are used to improve the texture and flex of the feet. Here again I prefer to use a creamy-type product that can be applied lightly to the hoof wall. It should adsorb reasonably quickly into the hoof, leaving a soft, “mossy” feel to the surface of the hoof. Oily or greasy products attract grit that can then scratch the natural protective surface of the hoof. The hoof is naturally moisturized by the blood supply, stimulated through exercise. Moist clay packed into the bottom of a cleaned hoof can soften feet that are dry and hard.

● **Highlighters** — They are mainly used on the face and ears. Limit the use of fragrance-containing materials, such as baby oil, around the muzzle. Mineral oil and petroleum jelly work very well.

● **Sun Block/Sunscreens** — These materials are used to protect the nose and other exposed areas of the body. Sunscreens are sometimes used to protect the coat from bleaching in the sun. These products can be expensive if used at levels that will protect the coat from losing its color. An alternative is to pasture horses at night and restrict them to shaded enclosures during sunny days. There are odorless sunblocks available specifically for the horse’s face and muzzle area which work well to prevent sunburn.

● **Liniment** — Used for rubbing and treating sore leg muscle areas. Dilute liniment solutions sponged over the body of the horse help in the cool-down process after a heavy workout.

● **Poultice** — Clay material used under bandages to draw heat and soreness from leg muscles.

● **Fly Spray** — Fly repellents should be applied to hair only; limit the horse’s exposure to these materials. Note that sunscreens are included in some insect repellents and are there to protect the pyrethrin, the active ingredient that is sun sensitive. I prefer to limit exposure of these products especially to sensitive areas of the horse’s body. Fly masks or screen should be used for the face and ears.

One should be careful while working with horses that do not like grooming or may have issues because of some type of injury. These horses will demonstrate behavior that includes dancing, pawing, biting, nipping, or kicking. It is important to have the horse’s attention and trust before any grooming can be accomplished. Once standing still, grooming can help build the horse’s trust in the groomer.

A safe approach is to always start with the horse’s neck and shoulder areas. When sensitive areas are discovered, watch the horse’s eyes and ears, then the mouth and feet. Typically horses will express themselves with their eyes and ears first. Look carefully at the area to be sure there isn’t something that needs veterinary attention. Go back to the neck area and work your way back to the sensitive area, where you will want to use a lighter, softer touch to the grooming process. Use hair moisturizers to help in the grooming process. These materials help soften the hair, reduce static charge, and sooth the skin when worked into the coat.

Having grooming solutions that work for the comfort of the horse is one of the cornerstones of good horse care and horsemanship. Good horse care contributes to the comfort of the horse, which can then lead to a supple horse that can more easily be collected. I hope you find something that truly helps you or a friend better enjoy their horses. 🐾

*Excerpted by permission from “Grooming for Horse and Rider, Importance of Groundwork” clinics presented by Tom Tweeten, Ph.D., of ATH Science, Inc., Prior Lake, Minn. For information on grooming clinics, call 952-226-4192 or go to [www.equiscentials.com](http://www.equiscentials.com).*