

While the practice of using herbs for medicinal purposes has been around for thousands of years, it is only recently that equine practitioners have been giving it to their horses. Essentially, herbal medicine refers to the use of plants or plant extracts to maintain or restore health. Some trainers and their veterinarians are choosing herbs as an alternate way to treat chronic disease without the side effects of long-term drug therapy.

The choice to use herbal remedies is one that needs to be made between trainers and their veterinarians. It is important to recognize that correct use of herbal medicine requires training and understanding of the disease process. When trainers purchase herbs and mix their own products, this can create confusion for the veterinarian.

It is important to note that part of the effectiveness of herbal medicine depends on herb quality and skill of the herbalist making the formula. Horses will eat raw whole or ground herbs readily and are capable of digesting raw herbs. Also available are external preparations of ointments and gels where the herbs are mixed with lanolin, oils, beeswax, honey or water-soluble gel.

Unfortunately, very little quality control exists within the natural products industry. However there are companies who do focus on quality control and are willing to answer questions about their formulas. There are statutory regulations that require disclosure of a wide range of things on a label. The most important items to look for are a complete list of the ingredients, the strength of extract and the part of the plant that is used.

There is a very important note of caution for any trainer who is using or considering using herbal medicine: because it is herbal or natural, that does not mean that it won't show a positive test. Some herbs do show a positive so if you are competing, ask the manufacturer if it has been tested. As absolute insurer, the trainer is responsible for any illegal substances found in their horse, even if that substance is found in an herb but not listed in the ingredients.