

CHAIN HARROWING WITH HORSES

Chain harrowing with your horse can be a fun new discipline for you to try, it's great exercise for your horse and you will also be able to manage your own paddocks much better. But to reach this aim it is important that you get adequate training for yourself and for your horse, that you understand what is needed in terms of the correct, well fitting harness and appropriate equipment. I work my horses full-time, carrying out a variety of work from horse-logging to bracken control as well as harrowing on paddocks and other conservation based land work. I wanted to write this article to give people a general overview of chain harrowing with a horse and all the things you need to consider.

Chain harrowing is hard work for a horse, this is a good thing but it does mean that you need to provide them with the right harness to do the job without being uncomfortable or injuring themselves, you need to build up slowly to doing the work and consider their fitness level too. The first most important thing to consider is the harness. For field work like this, heavy draught work, you need to use a full collar and suitable working harness. Many people think they can get away with using driving harness but it is not adequate for the job. A driving breast collar will not give your horse the support it needs to work comfortably, nor will you be able to harness their full power as you would using a full working collar. You could end up with sore shoulders and a horse that is not so keen on the job. A breast collar is also designed for pulling a cart, as well as the traces being too short they pull at the wrong angle for dragging something on the ground. Full working harness is expensive and hard to come by as the main source for modern day work harness is America or Canada. It is very hard to come by second hand, and of course all the usual caveats go with buying second hand in terms of safety. Old English ploughing collars can be sourced new and second hand in this country. The hames and harness are usually harder to find. Getting the correct size for the collar and harness is very important and hard for a novice. This is where training for yourself is important or finding someone with experience to help you measure up.

Even experienced horse folk should search out some training for themselves before embarking on harness work with a horse for the first time. I come across a lot of people who want to train their own horse for harness work, and this is a wonderful aim but in reality I try to pass on all the advice I was given by old hands, and that is that a 'green' horse and a 'green' person is a recipe for disaster, just because you can ride a horse does not mean you can drive one! Things can go wrong and unravel quite quickly and so either take yourself to learn from an experienced horse and handler or buy a very experienced horse and take it slowly. Ideally do both! You may be lucky and have a horse that has it in its blood, and seems to have the right temperament, or you may find you just have a knack for it. But often a lack of knowledge from yourself of how to fit the harness and how to guide the horse, can lead to confusion and trouble for all.

When it comes to choosing a chain harrow it's good to think about what you want to do and how big or fit your horse is. As my horses are working regularly and we offer our services to people professionally I need them to pull a decent harrow all day long without struggling. As a rule of thumb a horse can pull it's own weight, but this comes with a lot of variation. Certainly for chain harrowing they are not going to be pulling their own weight all day as there is a lot of additional drag, more like 10 per cent. It depends on the terrain, the drag, their fitness, their attitude. So an unfit horse, without that spark, trying to drag a heavy harrow up a steep hill is not going to end well. Equally don't go for something light and cheap and cheerful. A really light harrow that bounces about will also be quite dangerous and more unnerving for the horse to pull. This is one reason why I bought the heavy-duty harrow from **Paddock Equipment Ltd** @ www.chainharrows.co.uk. A standard 4ft x 5ft chain harrow should be manageable by most horses, unless they are really small, Shetland type, unfit or on hard or steep ground.

There is a lot to think about and hopefully that has helped to give you some idea of what is involved. I run training courses and offer advice for people wanting to learn to work with their horse to do chain harrowing or other work like logging. Although I have trained my horses, I do not take in other horses to train. For more information please see my website www.carnog.co.uk.

Barbara Hadrill

