

## **What's involved in breeding your mare**

### **When to breed**

A mare is technically fertile from about 18 months old. But, depending on the breed, she's not physically mature until at least four, so having a foal is not good for her or the foal. Of course, if a mare hasn't had a foal by the time she's about 12 years old, it gets harder too, so it's a bit of a balancing act. Many people breed a foal early in a mare's career then wait until she's retired or injured before making her a full-time broodmare.

### **How to tell your mare's in season**

Mares cycle around every 21 days during the spring, summer and autumn. Many mare owners will know when their mare is in season by a change in her behaviour; usually more sooky or stropy. However a more obvious sign is her 'showing' to other horses, which includes frequently urinating around them and 'winking' her vulva at them! Every mare is a bit different and some won't show at all, but an ultrasound by a vet or short-circuiting their cycle with prostaglandin (PG) shot can be very effective.

### **Picking the right stallion**

Just like human babies, foals are a product of both parents, so never assume you can simply improve on a flawed mare with the right stallion—it could go either way! At the same time, you need to make a list of all the desired traits of your future foal, which should always include soundness and good temperament. Then, do your research into which stallions have traits you really like, and go and meet some. No good stallion owner will mind a showing off their stallion to a visitor and it will give you a chance to see their facilities and handling technique, first-hand. Never make any assumptions—ask them!

### **Hand, paddock or AI?**

Paddock serving just means running the two horses together in the paddock and letting nature take its course. Both horses are more prone to injury if either is aggressive but, if not, it's usually a good result, with many more 'actual' services taking place. Hand serving means the mare and stallion are introduced over a safe fence then, when the time appears right (more 'showing'), they are brought together in a more controlled environment. Both give about 90% success, whereas artificial insemination, done by a vet, is a bit lower (particularly using frozen semen, which gets down to about 50%)

### **How do you know she's in foal?**

If all is well, three weeks later, your mare won't come back into season, exhibiting signs, like pinning her ears back when the stallion is near. If you live nearby, you can take your mare home, but many will leave their mares for another cycle, just to make sure she doesn't start showing again. This is when mares can 'slip' or lose their foal, due to stress, infection or poor condition. Ideally, you should have a vet check her 15–18 days after service to ensure she didn't conceive twins (one should always be 'pinched out' as up to 95% of twins die, and can even kill the mare). Another ultrasound at around 42 days will pretty much confirm you have a foal on its way, due 11 months after service.