

To Breed or Not to Breed that Jennet?

By Sybil E. Sewell

As spring approaches, thoughts of breeding that jennet who has been a faithful friend for several years run through the mind. But be aware that as the cliché goes there is more to breeding than meets the eye. The owner is responsible that everything possible has been done to ensure the safety and careful breeding of the jennet to an appropriate jack.

1. Using the CDMA Handbook, take a critical look at your jennet, or have an equine vet do so, to determine her conformation faults. Better yet, have her inspected at four years old or over to know whether she is of sufficient quality to enter the stud book. If she does not pass with 65% or higher, it is probably not wise to breed from her.

If she is an older jennet, age ten or over, with no known previous breeding history, discuss with your vet the merits and problems likely to arise from breeding such an older animal. Foal rejection is one problem that can often occur in older mares or jennets who have never previously produced a live foal.

2. Have a vet examine the jennet's reproductive tract to see if it is normal and healthy. There are recorded cases of jennets that look perfectly normal on the exterior, and even cycled normally, but never conceived a foal. Internal examinations proved that there was no connection between the vagina and the uterus. The abnormality left the vagina as a blind pouch and semen could never ever reach its destination!
3. For the sake and sanity of both jack and jennet owner, consider the jennet's education. Is she halter trained and easy to catch? Does she stand willingly to have her hooves trimmed? Does she load and travel in a trailer with no problems? While this type of basic education may seem irrelevant to the breeding process, it is vital should the jennet need to be removed from the pasture in case of accident, at the time of farrier work, or if the jack owner uses in-hand breeding methods or equine artificial insemination. Should the jack owner utilize the ultrasound technology of the local vet to verify pregnancy, the jennet may need to be trailered to the vet clinic.

If the jack owner is expected to give the jennet the basic education she should have received at home, don't be surprised if a training fee is added to the bill? Basic training should already have been completed at home before sending the jennet away for breeding.

4. Visit the owner of the jack to whom you plan to send your jennet. Talk extensively with the owner about methods of breeding (in-hand, pasture or artificial insemination),

take a tour of the facilities, and discuss feeding and management of the donkeys there and any special needs your jennet may have. For example, at Windy Ridge Farm, our breeding contract states that no jennet will be unloaded without negative Coggins test papers and a clean veterinarian's health certificate particularly with reference to the reproductive tract. Jennets are also requested to be dewormed, have hooves trimmed, and 4-way shots prior to coming to our farm for breeding.

If you are comfortable with the facilities and management, then meet the jack. Is he CDMA registered and inspected? What was his grade at inspection? Does he have a show record at halter or performance? If he is a large Standard or Mammoth, ask if he is a jennet jack or a mule jack.

5. Does it matter if the jack is a jennet jack or a mule jack? Nothing really, at least not on the exterior, but behaviorally speaking there can be a HUGE difference! A jennet jack has been raised to breed jennets and will readily accept them. Even so, if pasture breeding is used there can be considerable hassle of the jennet and chasing around. A few jacks will breed both horse mares or jennets, but most develop a strong preference depending on how they were raised.

A mule jack however, has been raised with horses with the goal in mind that he breeds horse mares for mule production. He looks like a donkey on the outside but he thinks like a horse on the inside. Because he doesn't think he is a donkey then he will behave more like a horse stallion and he may attack and savage any jennet presented to him for breeding. If a jennet is turned loose with such a jack she can be badly bitten and beaten, and it may take four or five grown men to drive him off and rescue her. The consequence of such traumatization can be that the jennet is terrified of being approached, never mind bred, by any jack in the future.

6. Take a critical look at the jack to whom your jennet will be bred. Evaluate his disposition, conformation and have him walked and trotted in front of you to evaluate his movement. What are his faults? Will his conformation compensate for the faults in your jennet? Check his height compared to that of the jennet you plan to have bred. I would seriously question breeding a 50" jennet to a tall Mammoth jack, especially a jennet with no previous breeding history. The general rule of thumb is to breed plus or minus four to six inches in height. The same consideration needs to be given to Miniature donkeys where breeding very small jennets (under 32") may be cause for future birthing problems.
7. Seriously question any thought of breeding a donkey in the fall or winter months in Canada unless a heated barn is available for cold weather foaling. Donkeys can foal after gestation periods of 11-14 months so it is easy for all but the most vigilant owner to miss the right time. Winter foaling in a snow bank can be fatal, or at the very least result in frozen ears, tails, or limbs. Generally foals produced in April - August, depending on the provincial location, do best because they have the advantage of

sunshine and fresh grass. Jennets may cycle erratically throughout a sunny winter, but may not ovulate because like all equines this time of year is a period of anestrus which gives them a reproductive rest.

With careful selection of both parents, and time of year for breeding, the resulting offspring should surpass both parents in quality and arrive at the best time of year for optimum growth and development.

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