

## Treats as a Training Tool

By Suzanne De Laurentis and Allen Pogue, Imagine A Horse, 2015

Food treats, in some circles have a bad rap...but treats can be used effectively and responsibly in horse training and preserve your horse's good manners.

Horses love treats and they can be highly motivated by them. If interesting correctly, treats can spark the horses desire to learn almost anything. Treats have always been an important part of our training at Imagine A Horse.

First, we use a "diminishing reward system" to keep the horse eager and engaged. We start by using treats generously and gradually switch to mostly stroking and verbal encouragement as we decrease the frequency of the treats. Often the move becomes a sort of intrinsic reward for the horse, making it easier to switch to stroking or verbal praise.

We recommend a treat pouch for easy access and less distraction for your horse. If you use a treat pouch, the smell of the treats will not be on your person after the session. Some horses just can't be tempted by the smell of treats and maintain their manners. It's important to use smaller, bite-sized treats. If a horse chews for too long, he may forget what he did to earn the reward. Experiment to find your horse's favorite flavor. Lady C for instance **loves** the Manna Pro peppermint treats.

We use a "bridge signal" like "good boy" to create the **expectation** for your horse that he will be rewarded. The words "Cookie Time" when given after the bridge signal serve to give the horse permission to come into your space to get his reward.

Teaching a horse to "smile" is a great first exercise as it teaches your horse about food rewards and helps you get your timing right.

First, put a small treat in the palm of your hand and lightly close your fingers around it.

Invite him to nose through your fingers as though he were picking a blade of grass.

Say "good boy" and within three seconds say "cookie time" and then let him take the treat.

Repeat the sequence as you coax him to wiggle his lip and reach out for the treat with his lips. At the same time, raise your index finger because this will become a visual cue to "Smile". You may also tickle the underside of his top lip to ask him to raise it.

Give a reward with each small improvement and a walk about between repetitions to give him a mental break.

Practice this with your horse in short sessions and repeat no more than 4 times. If possible, end on a good note even if you have to go back a step or two.

To prevent your horse from becoming a “cookie monster” only give a treat when your horse gives you the response you ask for. As many horses don't like the smell of citrus, another option is to hold a lemon in your hand and give the horse a gentle spritz of juice if he comes into your space without you asking. Be careful not to spritz the juice in your horse's eyes. We also use a product called NipBuster to correct a “muggy” horse. It's available on our web site.

**So remember, when using treats as a training tool:**

Timing is crucial to creating a reward system

Start with treats but gradually switch to verbal praise or stroking

Work in short sessions and allow your horse mental breaks

Prevent your horse from becoming a “cookie monster”



Lady C, “Rockin the Stars and Stripes”  
Food Treats are an important part of her training!



Big Ben has us pretty well trained...he smiles and we give him a cookie.



Teaching the "smile" helps the human to get his cues and timing right. Every horse has a unique way of smiling...Navegador uses both lips to tell us it's "cookie time."