

Winterizing Your Horse (Or Go South Instead!)

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Summer is barely over, but we have had a few cool nights and the trees are starting to turn colors in the Hilltowns. We bring in the lawn furniture, clean the gutters, check the woodpile and buy snow tires. Fall is also the time to plan for the impact of the harsher weather on our equine friends.

Water

Horses that have been on summer pasture have needed less water because of the moisture content of grass. The drier winter hay ration requires greater water consumption, something they may not be accustomed to. Additionally, many horses do not like cold water (it may hurt teeth or cause gastric pain in some horses) and do not do well with near freezing water. Adding cold water to partially frozen buckets will do little to encourage drinking. It would be better to use heated waterers, feed warm mashes, or even soak hay in a heated tack room to encourage additional water consumption.

Dentistry

The change to a drier diet also amplifies the need for adequate chewing. Dental problems should be identified and corrected before the cold weather creates a negative energy balance that may be hard to overcome until spring.

Feeding Hay and Concentrates

Hay for horses should be green, leafy and dust free. Since the average horse only needs about 10-11% protein in their total ration it is not vital that we provide the best second cutting legume hay. Quite often a grass hay will meet the forage requirement nicely. By feeding a lower energy hay we can feed a greater amount of it and more closely copy the natural diet of horses (that is to eat continual meals of medium quality hay...pure alfalfa hay is great for dairy cattle but is quite likely more than horses should get). This often gives the horse something to do and makes for a happier animal. After a very wet summer there is a lot of poor quality hay out there. Look for green, leafy hay that has no dust, but be prepared for somewhat higher prices due to supply and demand. Dusty hay will lead to COPD and other respiratory diseases. Higher fat feeds and extra grain are both good sources of energy that horses may require in cold weather. Corn is a great source of inexpensive calories. Hot bran mashes fed several nights a week may improve bowel function and lower the risk of impaction colic.

Vaccines

If your horses are going south for part of the winter be sure to booster for WNV (West Nile Virus) and EEE/WEE (Equine Encephalomyelitis) as well Influenza, Rhinopneumonitis and Strangles. Horses that will go to local shows and those exposed to a population of horses in transit may also wish to booster

the respiratory vaccines. If you are planning a quiet winter at home, no fall vaccines may be required at all.

Parasite Control

Fall is traditionally the time of year we scrape off the bot eggs and deworm with ivermectin. Other parasites are less active in the winter, so after a good fall deworming one may be able to stretch out the interval between deworming to 6-8 weeks.

Footing and Foot Care

Slippery conditions are responsible for several equine deaths each year. Standing water in horse areas should be drained prior to freezing to prevent icy patches. Sand may need to be broadcast to improve footing. Barefoot horses often have a fairly good grip. Special shoes with caulks, borium or snowball pads (to keep out the ice balls) may be helpful in keeping your horse on his or her feet.

Housing/Ventilation

While people's egos are fulfilled by fancy big barns, horses do just as well if not better in more modest surroundings. Dry bedding, good ventilation and protection from the wind and rain are all the horse requires. A shed facing away from the wind may be the perfect winter housing. Respiratory disease in horses is created by barns with low ceilings, closed windows and poor air flow, not cold weather. Heated barns and paved aisles are more geared to the human needs than those of the equine inhabitants!

Blankets

Blankets should fit well and be kept clean, often necessitating spares and mid-winter cleaning. If one plans on using their horse during the winter, a blanket will keep the hair coat more manageable. If a horse is clipped your horse a blanket is a must. Old, thin horses will do better with a blanket. As a rule of thumb, if one starts using a blanket one should not stop until the weather permits. For healthy horses that have no work expectations and even the most rudimentary of housing, blankets are not required.

Manure Handling

Think ahead about what you will do with all the winter waste. Leaving it on small paddocks dooms them to mud-hole status come spring. In the very near future composting our bedding will be required. There are several local companies that provide manure removal services. Contact your local Cornell Cooperative Extension Office for more information.