

## **Getting Horse Ready for Winter by Keith Vander Velde, Marquette County Agent**

With the colder days and nights it is important to prepare your horse for the cold winter period that will soon be upon us. Doing a few things now will make the transition easy on you and your horses. Horses are well suited to dealing with winter weather conditions. Left to their own devices in a natural state, horses will find adequate shelter, generate warmth by herding together, forage for appropriate food, and seek out open water to drink. However, now that we have fenced them into confined areas horses are more dependent on what we provide for food and protection.

Horses require a safe shelter from severe weather. With winter's shorter days and potentially nasty climatic conditions, your horse will be spending proportionately more time inside. Now is the time to do a thorough barn cleaning and to inspect and make any necessary repairs to your horse's living environment. Strip and bed stalls, seal off sources of freezing drafts, and check carefully for loose nails or boards which may need replacing. Sweep up piles of old hay and bits of grain from feed storage areas, making certain the grain supply is securely inaccessible to your animal, even in the event of his escape from his own enclosure. Outside, check fences and fence posts, and repair or replace as necessary. In areas with potentially heavy snowfall, build fences of adequate height and visibility to counteract the effects of deep snow. Horses have been known to walk right over or become entangled in low fences hidden under large snowdrifts.

Often one of the biggest mistakes horse owners make is locking horses in a barn and then have it sealed up so tightly that the temperature and humidity build up and the horse hair gets wet. This will actually result in the horse being chilled and often leads to pneumonia or related respiratory diseases in horse. Leave a door or window open to keep the air moving in the barn. Horses can handle extreme cold or wind or precipitation quite effectively. It is when these forces hit in any combination that your animal will need access to shelter. This shelter may be manmade or natural, but must offer protection from the prevailing winter winds and precipitation. Cold is normally not as big a factor as is the wind chill. Make sure you have an area where your horse is able to get out of the wind. Blanketing is not generally necessary for the average healthy horse. In fact, blanketing may retard the horse's natural ability to grow an adequate winter coat. However, the use of a blanket may ease the stress of cold weather on ill or injured, aged, thin, or very young animals whose energies need to be directed to efforts other than generating warmth.

Great care must be taken in converting your horse from a summer diet of primarily green grass to his winter fare of dried hay and grain. Fresh grass is laxative, but grass hay tends to have the opposite effect. Horses can experience fatal colics in the aftermath of an abrupt dietary change. Perhaps the safest way to accommodate this necessary seasonal change in diet is to continue feeding small amounts of hay throughout the late fall months to allow your horse's system to remain acclimated to dry feed. In any event, make any changes in the amount or type of feed very gradually over an extended period of time. Remember as the temperature drops your horse will need additional energy to keep warm. Increase the amount of hay 10-25% if the temperature gets below 0 degrees Fahrenheit.

Do not forget to check your horse's weight frequently throughout the winter months. This can be most easily done by taking off your gloves and running your hand down your horse's side and spinal column. If you can barely feel the outline of his ribs under slight hand pressure and can feel no significant protrusion of his backbone, he's maintaining adequate flesh. These frequent hands-on inspections also afford the opportunity to check your animal for injuries otherwise hidden from view by a long winter coat. Another effective method is to

have a friend come over and body condition score your horse for you. Since you see your horses every day it is often easy to not see the exact condition change on your horse and an outsiders view will be more objective.

Contrary to popular belief, horses will not generally derive adequate water from eating snow. Horses must be able to access clean, unfrozen water at least daily in cold weather. Impaction colics are frequent companions to a dry winter diet with inadequate water consumption to properly digest and pass the meal. Some horses refuse to drink sufficient water if the water is frigidly cold. Offering warmed water will encourage horses to drink more generously. Insulated buckets or bucket heaters (if used according to directions and not left unattended while plugged in) can be helpful in icy conditions. Metal buckets, however, are useless below freezing.

A routine practice in the control of parasitic infestations includes administering a deworming agent with a boticide after the first killing frost. Though effective deworming programs vary according to geographical location and management practices, a regular program should be established for your horse. Consult with your veterinarian to help determine the schedule most appropriate to your horse's situation.

Regardless of the reduced activity, or perhaps inactivity, of the season, horses' hooves continue to grow and require proper trimming or shoeing at six to eight week intervals throughout the winter. Horses ridden over snowy or icy surfaces can require shoes equipped with studs or caulks and anti-balling pads to provide a safe measure of traction.

Horses can certainly be ridden in the winter and may well appreciate the diversion and activity. However, care should be taken not to overexert the animal to the point of labored breathing and/or excessive sweating. Irreparable damage to the lungs may result from the rapid and deep inhalation of freezing air. Horses can also catch nasty chills and come down ill if left wet after a hard ride. Winter riders should always have several wool coolers on hand to prevent chills in damp animals. It may be advisable to partially clip horses that are ridden frequently during the winter to facilitate post-exercise cooling and drying. Any clipped horse will require warm blanketing to compensate for the lack of coat.

Caring for your horse during the coldest winter months may indeed challenge your commitment to horse ownership. I have yet to meet anyone who relishes the opportunity to chop ice out of frozen water buckets or wheel manure through snowy drifts in subzero weather. Remember, though, that these animals give of themselves at our beck and call. We spend happy hours as uninvited passengers aboard these sturdy steeds. The care taking our horses require is surely in keeping with the care taking they provide.