

Winterizing Your Horse

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Depending on where you spend your winters, your horse may or may not need to be “winterized” when days grow short. If you winter in milder climates, your horse care routine may not change much if you ride regularly. However, if you give your horse a “winter vacation” you will have to pay close attention so that your trail riding partner or show horse is healthy and ready to go in the spring. Unfortunately, horses are not like golf clubs or boats that can be put away and forgotten until the next season. They need some care even when all you want to do is stay indoors by the fire.

Nutrition

For every ten degrees below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, your horse’s energy needs will increase slightly. This requirement increases even more if the weather is wet and windy. The wind chill index really does matter. Extra calories should be provided in the form of high quality, highly digestible forage – not grain. The fermentation of the fiber in the hind gut is what helps the horse produce extra body heat to cope with cold temperatures. Contrary to popular belief, corn is not a “hot feed” as such and any grain or other soluble carbohydrate source should be used with caution to prevent colic and founder. Any “easy keeper” or horse with insulin resistance or Cushings disease should receive little or no calories in the form of sugars found in grain and some hays. If using grain, consider oats which have a higher insoluble fiber content.

Be sure your hay is good quality. Poor hay may need to be supplemented with a protein source and a balanced vitamin/mineral supplement. Be sure there is a loose trace mineral mix formulated for horses available at all times. Poor quality hay may also contribute to impaction colics in colder weather when horses won’t consume adequate amounts of water. Be sure there is plenty of open water available at all times in cold weather.

Monitor body condition by feeling under the long, winter hair coats. Horses can become very thin under all that hair before you notice that there is a problem. Pay particular attention to older horses, pregnant mares, or other special needs members of the herd. Once weight loss occurs in these horses, it is often hard to correct. Feed horses so that the more timid ones don’t get “beat out” of the feed. Spread hay out to decrease competition for feed or separate out horses so they can be fed in more compatible groups. It is best to separate out young horses and any that have a hard time competing in a group.

Check the teeth of all horses early in the season. You will spend less on wasted feed if horses can chew and properly digest everything you feed.

Housing

Horses are meant by nature to live outdoors in all kinds of weather. In fact, given the choice, most horses will stand outside in the snow. The key to being comfortable is a dry hair coat. Long winter hair insulates the horse as long as it stays dry. Providing some kind of shelter is essential. When designing shelter, try to build them so horses don't get trapped by more aggressive herdmates. If using metal buildings, be sure to line them with wood to prevent injuries to horses that may kick through the walls of unlined metal sheds. Check horses in wet weather and bring in any horses that are shivering. Hypothermia can occur even at moderate temperatures if horses get wet down to the skin. Although it is human nature to close up everything tight in cold weather, be sure your barn has adequate ventilation. Ammonia fumes and dust can reach extremely high levels in barns which can result in serious respiratory problems in resident horses. "Heaves" and susceptibility to respiratory viruses can result from lung damage by these agents. Keep stalls clean and avoid allowing dust or hay residue to accumulate in the barn. Your local university extension agent can provide ventilation testing at little to no charge.

Hoof Care

Hoof care is often overlooked during the off season when horses are not being used. Shoes can be pulled from idle horses but hooves should be trimmed regularly to avoid problems associated with long toes and flares. Shelly, cracked hooves are normally the result of hoof neglect rather than poor nutrition. If riding in snowy conditions, leaving horses barefoot will result in fewer snow and ice balls. Coating the bottom of the foot with Vaseline or cooking spray can help too. If horses are shod and regularly ridden in snow, using a snow or ice pad will prevent the development of ice balls.

When riding in winter, try to avoid having the horse sweat heavily. If heavy sweating occurs, use a wool cooler and dry the horse out of the wind before turning him back out. Using special clips and blankets may be needed if you ride regularly in cold temperatures. If blanketing, avoid having the horse sweat under the blanket by removing it when the temperature rises. Be sure the blanket fits properly to avoid rubs.

Finally, when riding resumes in the spring, condition your horse slowly and carefully to avoid injuries.