

Let it snow...but not at your horses' expense

Winter can be the cruelest season for horses, with temperatures often dipping below the freezing mark and snow covering the fields. As with any pet, it's important to take several steps to ensure that your horse is healthy and happy throughout these difficult months.

Diane Tuorto

HUNTERDON HORSE BEAT



The writer, a resident of Stanhope, owns a Morgan mare and spends time volunteering with equine organizations. In March 2006, Diana self-published her first collection of poems and in 2008, My Desert Sun, Diana's first children's novel, will be published. She runs the Web site at <http://horsewelfare.8k.com>.

Shelter, Shelter, Shelter

Many horses grow woolly coats for the winter, but that can only protect them so much when the wind chill is -15 degrees. If your horses live out in a field full-time, make sure they have access to a deep, well-insulated shed, facing away from the prevailing winds. The shed should always be filled with plenty of shavings or straw to allow the horses to keep warm. If you have multiple horses in a field, make sure there is adequate room for each horse to share the shed's space, without them standing on top of each other. Often, horses will spend the majority of the winter days huddling in the shed, so they'll start getting on each other's nerves after a while and will need as much breathing room as possible. Even horses that are only turned out a few hours a day should have some shelter from the elements.

"Turnout is always important for a horse's overall health and well-being," said Joanne Pelosi, owner and manager of Pleasant Meadow Farm in Readington Township. "Personally, my horses

wear as many layers as I do during the winter months. So, whatever I put on to work outdoors is translated to their wardrobes as well."

If your horse has been turned out 24/7 since the summer or early fall, he or she should have a thick enough winter coat to protect them from the elements. However, if the temperatures are dipping well below freezing, it's often good to keep a warm blanket on them, especially in windy, snowy or freezing rain conditions when the horse's coat isn't able to insulate as well. Obvious signs to watch for are a decrease in your horse's appetite, weight loss or shivering. Horses that are clipped or only turned out part-time should always be blanketed when turned out in freezing or inclement conditions as they will have much less of a coat for protection.

Certain breeds seem to deal with the winter weather better than others. Thoroughbreds and Warmbloods can sometimes have more trouble keeping weight on than a Morgan or Quarter Horse. If your horses are thin or just

have a harder time holding their weight, they should have a proper blanket for extra protection in freezing conditions.

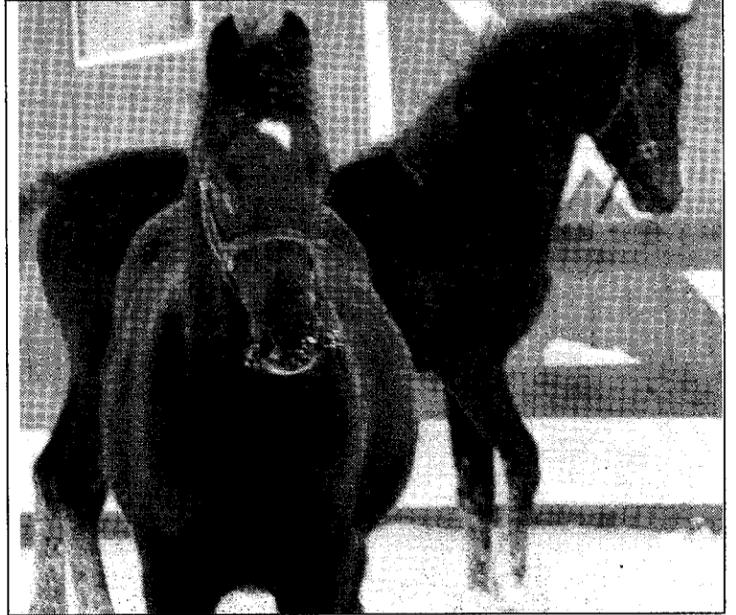
Feed Me

Many horse owners think that they can maintain the same feeding schedule as they did during the spring, summer or fall months. This is one of the biggest mistakes you can make. Horses need extra food to keep them going during the winter. For example, if you feed your horse two or three flakes of hay twice a day, that should be at least doubled during the winter, especially for an outdoor horse. There obviously isn't much or any grass available to eat, so the horses will need to make up for what they're lacking. The hay provides the horses with extra warmth and basically refuels them, and it's a great idea to throw them some extra hay, especially in the evenings, to get them through those cold nights.

With many horses, grain should also be increased, especially if your horse is ridden frequently throughout the winter. Certain supplements, such as flaxseed oil, can also be beneficial to helping your horse keep weight on.

"As grazing animals, horses need a constant supply of roughage in their system, which will also help keep them warm," Pelosi said. "Ice-free water is just as important. Throwing hay periodically throughout the day and adding a water heater to encourage drinking are the keys to keeping your equines healthy and happy throughout the cold winter."

It is very important to monitor a horse's access to water during the winter. Horses will not drink water that is close to freezing (and obviously they can't drink frozen ice), so bucket water heaters are a great way to make sure that your horse has warmer water to stay hydrated. An ideal water temperature to maintain is about 60-65 degrees. If you aren't able to use a heater, be sure to check the horses' water several times a day. Break up the ice blocks and completely remove them from the buckets, refilling with warm (not hot or boiling) water. If you simply break up the ice and leave them floating in the buckets, the water will refreeze in mere mo-



Keeping your horse comfortable during the winter months is essential for their well-being.

ments, and this chilly water is too cold for horses to drink anyway. Without proper water access, horses will have a difficult time digesting their grain or hay, which can oftentimes lead to colic.

Worming

Another item that many horse owners forget to maintain during the winter months is regular worming. Many times, parasites continue to thrive during the cold weather, so it's best as a precaution to continue your standard worming schedule year-round.

My Hooves Are Cold

In addition to providing adequate shelter, water access, worming and increased feed, your horse's hooves need to be properly cared for during the winter. Even though hooves grow a little slower this time of year, they should still be trimmed close to your normal schedule as needed. Unless your horse has a specific condition, which requires shoes, it's often best to remove shoes for the cold season. A shod horse walking in icy conditions will slip more easily. Also, snow can get very packed in shod hooves, making the horses colder and sometimes allowing conditions like thrush to develop more quickly. Barefoot horses also need their hooves picked out regularly; once or twice daily is ideal.

By most accounts, it is usually best to keep your horse barefoot year-round, unless they are doing a strenuous amount of riding and jumping or have a condition which requires the extra support. Also, some horses' hooves are more brittle during the winter and can benefit from a regular

hoof moisturizer. When in doubt, consult a reputable farrier.

Listen To Your Horse

Again, the biggest mistake many horse owners make is not listening to the signs that their horse is giving them. If your horse is seen shivering, appears to be losing weight, or is not eating or drinking regularly, it's obvious that your horse is cold or may be ill. When in doubt about your horse's overall health or weight, it's always wisest to consult your veterinarian immediately. Our horses give us a lot; the least we can give them is year-round proper care.

For more information, Pelosi can be contacted through her Web site at www.pleasantmeadowfarm.com.

A Winter Mash Recipe

A special thanks to Clinton Township resident Gena Fontaine-Bark of Maple Lane Farm & Deerfield Show Jumpers for sharing the following winter mash recipe.

Take normal grain, add lukewarm water and a pinch or two of baking soda.

This mash warms horses and keeps them drinking on bitter, cold days.

If the horse is a poor drinker, feed multiple meals with up to a gallon of water mixed with the food, which will insure proper hydration.

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Please send your comments and suggestions for upcoming columns to Diana Tuorto at lunar_aradia@yahoo.com. ▼

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