

The Springtime Sweep

Farm chores and fixes all horse owners should consider post-thaw

The cold weather is starting to break, hinting that spring is almost upon us. You've been eagerly awaiting getting back into a regular riding routine after a long winter. As your farm thaws out, it's the perfect time to dewinterize, clean, and repair—not just for your facility's sake but also your horses'.

“Although springtime conditions generally trend toward warmer temperatures, the weather can be quite variable and have significant fluctuations from daytime to overnight,” says Casey Gruber, DVM, a Montana native who practices at Red Lodge Veterinary Clinic, southwest of Billings. “This variability in weather requires changing and flexible manage-

ment of our horses. Considerations such as footing, shelter, use of blankets, and diet are a few examples of ever-changing variables in the spring.”

Blanket Woes

With spring's arrival come the inevitable questions every horse owner has about blanket choices. “This is the time of year where we need to keep a few blanketing options handy at the barn and be prepared to adjust to the imminent weather conditions,” says Melissa McKee, DVM, co-owner of McKee-Pownall Equine Services, with three clinic locations in Ontario, Canada. “Ideally, you should have a couple of blankets handy

in case one gets wet, so you can swap off and allow the soaked one to dry.”

Don't get so focused on getting the blankets dry enough to put on your horse that you forget the horse's coat; it should also be dry before reblanketing. This can help prevent rain rot and other springtime skin problems from developing.

Once winter is nearly over, you can clean, repair, and store all heavy blankets. The same can be done with lighter-weight sheets once they are no longer in use.

Mealtime Transitions

As your horse begins grazing green grass and transitioning into a schedule with regular exercise, it's time to look at



PAULA DA SILVA

First on your barn to-do list should be sweeping and removing dust and cobwebs from all surfaces, including rafters.

his core nutrition needs and adjust his rations as needed. You should monitor your horse's body condition score regularly, use a weight tape periodically, and/or keep an eye on how the girth fits and then adjust his diet accordingly, says Ann Swinker, PhD, associate professor of equine science and horse extension specialist at Pennsylvania State University, in University Park.

Make any nutrition changes gradually, and tailor the diet to each horse's needs. Talk to your veterinarian, an equine nutritionist, or an equine feed company representative about any forage, grain, and supplement changes you need to make coming out of winter.

Also think about your horse's hydration, taking the time to regularly scrub all buckets, troughs, and waterers, rinsing and refilling with fresh water. Inspect all automatic waterer components to ensure they are working properly. It's also a good time to clean and reorganize the feed room or feed storage area. If you discover



ISABELLE ARNON

Clean, repair, and store all heavy blankets, then do the same with your lightweights once the weather warms.

your bins are damaged or worn out, buy new ones now.

Inside the Barn

Swinker advises owners to perform a deep clean of the entire barn and all stalls as soon as the weather allows. Depending on your facility's size, you might want to arrange for help if it's more than a one-person job.

If it's a warm spring day and conditions are sunny and dry, Swinker suggests opening all barn doors and windows and turning all horses out so they won't be inhaling dust, dirt and other particulates, chemicals, and pathogens (disease-causing organisms) while you clean. Be sure to wear your own protective equipment (a mask, protective eyewear).

First, sweep the barn and remove dust and cobwebs from all surfaces, including rafters, with a broom and a vacuum. Next, strip stalls of all organic material, such as manure, bedding, and hay, and scrub surfaces with a safe disinfectant or cleaning solution to kill any pathogens. "You want to be careful that you don't use anything that (leaves behind) fumes that could be toxic to you or the horses later," says Swinker.

If possible, remove stall mats, clean and disinfect them, and let them air-dry completely in the sun before you put them back in the stall and add new bedding. An approach for permanent mats or flooring would be using a wet-dry vacuum to get all the moisture out before re-bedding the stall.

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Now that the stalls are done, it's time to look at the rest of the barn. Walk every inch, look high and low, and think about what else needs to be cleaned, inspected, maintained, or repaired.

Check all electrical wiring, plumbing, hoses, and nozzles for damage and repair as needed. Don't forget to inspect windows and doors, and their hardware, too.

Evict unwelcome critters that might have moved into the barn. Be careful if you go the chemical route to kill insects and other vermin, as many products are harmful to horses, pets, and people, especially children. Krishona Martinson, PhD, equine extension specialist in the University of Minnesota's Department of Animal Science, in Minneapolis, says her favorite nonchemical pest control option is adopting one or more barn cats. Their mere presence can deter mouse and other vermin populations.

Community Areas

It's also important to clean areas people use, such as the tack room, bathroom, and office.

Make sure all tack and gear is in working order and usable. Repair anything that is broken, toss anything that can't be fixed, organize your belongings, and clean the area thoroughly, says Swinker.

Take an inventory of all supplies and equipment, and order items that are running low or that you will need once warm weather has arrived. Order new fly spray or predator flies, and if you have a fly spray system, be sure it is functional, including all nozzles and pipes.

Spring is a great time to make sure you have a plan for potential emergencies, such as weather events or fires, and/or make any needed updates to that plan.

"It's a good time to check your fire extinguishers and make sure that they work or even make sure that you have them," says Swinker. In addition, inspect all fire and smoke alarms and sprinkler systems. Look in your first-aid kit, restock its contents (refer to page 24 of the February issue for a handy list), and toss anything that has expired.

Outside the Barn

Tackle these projects anytime, but to be most efficient you can gather a crew of employees or volunteers to work outside while others work inside.



PAM WACKENZIE

Scrub all buckets, troughs, and waterers, and make sure their components are working.

Fix drainage issues (TheHorse.com/38700) around the barn, says Swinker. One way to do this is with landscaping (TheHorse.com/38701). Remove debris that might have accumulated when plowing snow from driveways, etc. Clear out gutters and downspouts, and make repairs as necessary. In addition, inspect roofs of all buildings to ensure repairs aren't needed before spring rains cause leaks or wind gusts exacerbate existing damage.

Perform soil tests to see what nutrients pastures are missing and to plan your lime and fertilizing strategy (TheHorse.com/35622), then order what you need.

Walk the entire pasture, assessing its quality, removing weeds and toxic plants, and filling in holes as you go. Seek a local extension specialist's advice if you need help with pasture management and/or identifying noxious weeds.

Next, walk all fences and perform maintenance and repairs. In addition, schedule routine maintenance for farm machinery, vehicles, and horse trailers.

Then it's time to look at your riding areas. Harrow or drag your arenas and evaluate your footing. Each area of the country is different so, again, your extension specialist can provide useful insight on improving moisture content or reducing dust.

Next, hit the trails for cleanup. Move debris off the path, and trim low-hanging branches.

The Dreaded Mud Pit

Many horse owners wage a constant war with mud in their pastures during spring. We schlep hay to our horses through ankle-deep muck, sometimes losing a boot, then slipping and falling as we try to catch our steed. Once we finally get him back to the barn, we get to curry off all that mud caked on his coat. Mud can harbor harmful bacteria and attract pests, such as flies and mosquitoes. It can also contribute to thrush, hoof abscesses, white line disease, rain rot, pastern dermatitis, and the shoe loss that Gruber says he sees frequently in spring.



ISABELLE ARNON

Walk your fencelines looking for areas in need of maintenance and repair.

For these reasons it's important to get a handle on mud issues early.

Mud often develops around gates, hay and water sources, run-in sheds, and anywhere horses tend to congregate and stand. When fields become muddy messes or when horses need to be separated or moved off pasture, Swinker recommends using a sacrifice area or installing a high-traffic area pad, which is a turnout with a prepared hardened surface, in these heavily used areas. She suggests owners seek resources provided by their local extension office or local Natural Resource Conservation Service offices to learn more about sacrifice lots. In addition, she says some states provide cost-share money for livestock owners who need to put in sacrifice lots.

Martinson says high-traffic area pads also provide a sturdier surface for horses to stand on and reduce mud in the paddock. To create one of these pads, you must excavate down through the topsoil layer until you reach hard, stable soil.



ALAYNE BLICKLE

Install high-traffic pads or gravel in heavily used areas, such as near gates and water tanks.

Then you lay down a geotextile fabric, followed by a crushed stone base layer and a densely graded aggregate before compacting the ground. For more on these surfaces, see TheHorse.com/29345.

McKee says she's seen some farm man-

agers set up their paddocks so they can move the gate location when spring rains and snowmelt create mud issues. Others change the location of where they feed pastured horses by moving feed tubs, hay racks, and water tanks to allow muddy areas to recover.

She also suggests adding geotextile fabric and gravel to reduce sinking in certain spots as mud issues arise. Sand, wood bark, sawdust, or crushed asphalt might also help prevent mud in some low-lying or heavily trafficked areas.

Another option is overseeding (TheHorse.com/26981); however, this requires removing horses from the area long enough for perennial grasses (orchardgrass, a perennial ryegrass, or Kentucky bluegrass) or an annual ryegrass to become firmly established, which can sometimes take six months or so. Keep in mind that some grasses only provide a short-term solution. Ask your local extension agent how to seed in your area properly, because the type of grass, time of seeding, seed quality, soil test results, soil fertility, climate, and weather patterns affect the process.

Take-Home Message

Spring cleaning and maintenance around the farm are important for your facility's longevity and aesthetics and your horses' health. While warmer temperatures bring about many changes and a long list of things to get done, it's well worth the work once you start riding your horses on a consistent basis and enjoying a clean and well-maintained farm. 🐾

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