

# Making Winter Manageable on the Farm

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Photo: Anne M. Eberhardt

*These preparations can help carry you and your horses through the cold, dark, and wet months ahead.*

Preparing for a chore-efficient chilly season is a great way to beat the winter blues. Plus, it's rewarding to work on tasks that put you ahead of the horse property management curve. North American winters can be cold, wet, and windy. For much of the continent, you can add snowy and icy to that list. There always seem to be a few storms that bring horse care routines to a screeching halt for days on end, stretching into weeks for the unfortunate. But as with most things, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This list of preparations can help carry you through months ahead when you least want to deal with winter's surprises.

***Review your horse health routine with your veterinarian.*** Dental care, a vaccination program, and parasite control are important components of a regular horse care routine, but with the start of cold weather they become

even more important. Review your horse health management program with your vet, and if your horse needs attention in any of those areas, address it before cold weather hits and he has trouble maintaining body condition.

**Buy your winter hay supply.** Look for green, leafy, fresh-smelling hay with no mold, weeds, dust, or discoloration. Recent nutritional recommendations (*The Basics of Equine Nutrition*, 2008) suggest a horse receive 1.5-2% of his body weight in forage per day. For the "average" 1,000-pound horse in moderate exercise, that equates to about 20 pounds of hay per day, or 600 pounds of hay per month. Since hay is usually sold in bulk by the ton (2,000 pounds), one ton of hay will last about 3 1/3 months for an average-sized horse. Do the math to determine how many tons of hay you'll need to maintain your horses through the winter, plus at least 10% extra to account for wastage. If you don't have room to store that amount, perhaps a horsey neighbor might. Two or more of you could go in on the purchase and reduce costs for all.

**Add footing material to paddocks, confinement areas, and high-traffic areas.** Good footing in these areas allows surface water to drain well, decreasing erosion and reducing mud and pollution from runoff. Alan Shank, a farm planner for the Snohomish Conservation District, in Lake Stevens, Wash., works with many horse owners and owns horses himself. "I like a solid footing such as crushed rock for high-traffic areas such as the fronts of stall doors and walkways," he says. "Other confinement areas can have softer footing such as coarse sand or hogfuel (chipped wood)."

More of these materials are available in the summer and fall before demand is high. Plus, it is much easier for delivery trucks to traverse paddocks and pastures during dry months, before they become a slick and muddy mid-winter mess. Shank recommends putting footing down in a thick layer, no less than six inches deep.

**Begin a manure management program.** If you don't already pick up manure on a regular basis, now is the time to start, particularly since horses produce an average 50 pounds daily. When mixed with rain or snow over the winter this quickly turns into more than 50 pounds of muck. Picking up manure regularly from stalls, paddocks, confinement areas, and high-traffic areas minimizes the amount of mud on your farm over the winter months, making chore life easier. This also helps minimize parasite load in these areas, reduces flies and odors, helps prevent groundwater and surface water pollution, and improves pasture quality (because you can reapply the composted manure).

**Cover manure piles.** This will help keep desired nutrients in the compost, rather than allowing them to wash out into surface waters where they can cause potential pollution problems. Be sure to store manure as far as possible from streams, ditches, or wetlands to avoid contamination.

**Check gutters and downspouts.** Now is the time to repair or add to your roof runoff system. "Some improvements are really basic, like making sure you have gutters and downspouts on all the buildings," says Shank. "That is one of the first things I tell landowners I work with: Make sure the clean rainwater off the roof is diverted away from building and confinement areas, as well as any working areas."

Good places to divert to on your property include grassy ditches, dry wells, rain barrels, stock watering tanks, well-vegetated woods, or unused portions of pasture.

**Reroute surface water runoff.** Runoff from large, flat areas such as driveways, parking lots, or hillsides can significantly complicate mud and ice management in horse areas. Ditches, grassy swales, dry wells, water diversion bars, and culverts are useful means for diverting water away from confinement areas and barns. Explains April LaLande, a Washington horse owner and environmental education contractor, "During the first big storms of

the fall we always go outside to check how our drainage is working. We look to see where water is flowing from and to and that paddocks are staying as dry and as well-drained as possible. If not, we make changes."

***Bring your horses in off pastures.*** Pastures grazed too closely in the autumn are subject to winter damage and will be slow to grow come spring. This is because during winter pasture plants become dormant and unable to regrow, and soils are saturated with moisture and easily compacted. Thus, allow grass plants to produce at least four inches of leaf growth for winter protection, and confine your horses in a separate winter paddock or sacrifice area.

***Provide shelter for your horses.*** A healthy horse can withstand cold temperatures, but he needs protection from relentless wind, driving rain, and wet snow. He loses considerable body heat when it's windy, and the situation worsens when he is wet. A simple roofed three-sided run-in shed provides adequate protection if it's well-drained and well-ventilated.

***Make sure your barn is well-ventilated.*** Winter is the time for respiratory disease. Besides vaccinating, one of the best defenses against respiratory disease is good structure ventilation. A closed barn accumulates ammonia fumes and dust and provides a warm, moist environment ideal for mold and germ growth. Keep an outside door or window open near each stall.

***Deter rodents.*** Mice and rats can cause hundreds of dollars of damage per year in feed loss and structural harm. Discourage rodents by eliminating food and water sources and places they might nest. Store all feed in aluminum garbage cans with secure lids. Pick up cat and dog food at night and clean up feed or spilled grain. Keep the barn tidy; piles of towels, rags, horse blankets, and old feed bags are all things rodents would love to spend the winter in and should not be left lying around.

**Set up a water supply that won't freeze.** A horse drinks eight to 12 gallons of water per day and prefers water temperatures of about 45-65°F, according to the University of Idaho Extension's 2011 *Cold Weather Feeding Practices for Horses*. A horse cannot stay hydrated from eating snow, and a decrease in water consumption can lead to colic. To ensure your horses drink an adequate amount on very cold days, break ice in the water tanks in the morning and again in the evenings or purchase a stock tank heater or heated stall buckets. Plan ahead and have this equipment on hand before the snow flies.

**Insulate pipes and faucets.** Visit your local hardware store for recommendations on what to use (e.g., heat tape or other insulation materials) in your barn.

**Avoid mold.** Mold loves dark, stuffy areas, so deter its growth by introducing light and air circulation. Adding a window, ceiling fan, or heater in your tack room might do the trick--many times just leaving a regular incandescent 60-watt light bulb burning is prevention enough.

**Consider your winter storm preparedness.** Do you have flashlights for the house and barn hanging in easily accessible locations? Are extra batteries on hand? How about fuel for generators, cook stoves, and lanterns? Battery-powered headlamps that free up your hands are excellent to have if the electricity goes out. A battery-powered radio and a weather radio are both useful during storms and power outages.

Develop a backup plan for watering your horses (e.g., storing water in rain barrels) before you lose power to your well during a major winter storm. Emergency officials generally recommend having a three-day supply of water on hand, which is a minimum of 30 gallons of water per horse. Access to a creek or lake might work as your backup watering source if you train your horses to drink from these beforehand.

***Mend and wash blankets.*** If you plan to blanket your horse this winter, send dirty horse clothes out for cleaning before the major cold fronts roll in.

***Review equipment needs for daily chores.*** "Having the right tools for the job means it's more likely you'll be motivated to get your tasks done when it's dark and cold," LaLande says. Some of the necessary tools she suggests include snow shovels that can be used on gravel, tractor implements such as a harrow and a blade, and intact manure forks. Consider getting a manure cart that's easy to push and dump. Heavy-duty plastic-tined type manure forks with a bent edge are made specifically for cleaning horse stalls and paddocks. In cold weather metal handles can be tough to grip--not to mention cold--so seek forks with wooden handles or wrap metal handles with tennis grip tape or self-adherent bandaging tape (Vetrap, etc.).

***Check fencing.*** Give your fencelines a once-over to check for damage before winter weather hits and again after the first high winds or heavy snows. This precaution can prevent horses from escaping or becoming injured on downed fencing.

All told, getting a head start on winter chores now will translate to an easier, more manageable season.