

MUCKING OUT AND STABLE CARE

The art of stable care is usually seen as a chore that needs to be completed with as little time expended as possible. I know this to be true, I do it myself. However, what a stable bed is required to do and the reasons behind our choice of bedding and bedding systems is often overlooked when faced with an ever growing choice of bedding and matting systems. When I was asked to write this article, I found myself re-investigating not only how I mucked out, but why.

The most basic reason for mucking out is obviously to remove any manure and urine left by a horse. However, what is the reason for having bedding in a stable in the first place? The answer is that any bedding used must serve multiple functions. Firstly, the bedding must protect the horse from injury. It must be soft and it should cover the whole stable floor. This will help alleviate the strain on your horses' limbs and joints after standing in the stable for any long periods. Bedding should be banked against the wall to help prevent a horse getting cast in the stable. It also is essential that bedding exists to prevent the horse from slipping on the floor. Secondly, bedding helps to provide warmth and comfort to the horse whilst awake and asleep. Although, most horses sleep standing up and for around 7 hours in a 24 hour day, many will at some point rest lying down, so a soft comfortable bed is essential to encourage your horse to lie down in comfort and without risk of injury. Thirdly, bedding should be used to encourage the horse to urinate in the enclosed space of a stable, as they dislike doing this on a hard, bare floor. Finally, bedding exists to help control the spread of bacteria and ammonia produced from horses' urine and faeces. Ammonia is an irritant to the airways and is released by the action of bacteria on degrading organic matter. It inhibits the ability of the defence mechanisms in the airways to remove particles from the lung and can also increase the production of mucus. The more absorbent a bedding is, the lower the levels of ammonia will be. Mucking out regularly will also reduce the risk of parasitic worm infestation.

Armed with the requirements of a stable bed, we have three different bedding systems which are designed to look after the horses' welfare. These are deep litter, daily removed bedding and semi-deep litter systems. Each has their merits and problems, but this has been further complicated in recent years by the arrival of rubber matting which is now very affordable.

The deep litter system requires the use of absorbent bedding such as shavings, pellet bedding or paper. The manure and worst wet areas are removed and the bed is topped with fresh bedding each day. The stable should be mucked out at least twice a day, and ideally more frequently if possible. The whole bed needs to be removed, at regular intervals, including the wet areas, and the stable, cleaned, hosed and disinfected. This method works well as it is labour saving, economical and warm and comfortable for the horse due to the thickness of the bed. However, the bed can become soggy and ferment which can lead to foot problems if it is not properly maintained. If the whole bed is not changed regularly, the wet area can become extremely difficult and unpleasant to remove as the compacted bed can set like concrete and ammonia will be released once the removal process is started.

A daily removed system involves the removal of the entire bed on a daily basis and can work very well with a rubber matting bed. The advantages are the use of minimal bedding which is replaced every day. If drainage bedding such as straw is being used, good drainage out of the stable is necessary to allow urine to leave the stable. It is then very easy to remove all manure from the stable and to effectively disinfect the area. However, if minimal bedding used, comfort and support for the horse can be compromised. The stable can be very cold in winter (the most likely time for a horse to be kept indoors), a horse lying in their own droppings will always be dirty, and it does little to prevent the horse from becoming cast. Of course, if a good amount of bedding is used to provide warmth, comfort and protection for your horse, then the cost implications are considerable.

A semi deep litter system is a combination of both. Although the bedding thickness is much lower than a deep litter bed, a warm, safe and pleasant environment is created for the horse. The entire bed is replaced and disinfected on a weekly basis. By replacing the bed in this regular way, all traces of manure and the entire wet area is removed. The wet area does not start to degrade as in the deep litter bed and bacteria are killed by the deeper weekly clean by using disinfectant, reducing the threat of parasitic worms. It is also easier and faster to carry out this deep clean as it is carried out more often. This has the added benefit of being able to see stable maintenance issues much easier and sooner.

And what have I learnt from this experience? That there are no shortcuts in mucking out and that the horses' welfare is paramount. Although cost will always be an issue with your horses bedding, the care you provide for your horse will pay dividends in terms of animal health and happiness. Perhaps mucking out is like life; the more effort you put in, the greater the satisfaction you get out.

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