

Mucking 101

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3-26-2001

How difficult is it to muck a stall? You walk in with a pitchfork, and, well, start shoveling.

Sounds simple enough and while this method certainly accomplishes the job, you could be wasting time and money if this describes your current cleaning methods. Worse yet, you could be overlooking easily preventable health hazards to your horse.

To Start

The goal of mucking a stall is simply to remove the wastes for the health and comfort of your horse. This begins by assembling the proper tools.

Your stable should be equipped with a mucking fork or a pitchfork with tines positioned close together, a good broom, a plastic muck bucket large enough to hold manure from one stall but not so cumbersome you can't handle it, and a wheelbarrow. In the winter, a rubber-headed mallet is useful for breaking the ice in water buckets. A long-handled scrub brush with which to clean buckets is also helpful, but a hay whisk will do in a pinch.

Stalls should be mucked at least once a day, although twice a day is ideal. This usually takes about 15 minutes per horse in the morning, and about five or 10 minutes in the evening. Mucking twice a day keeps your horse drier and cleaner — something owners of grays, paints, palominos and horses with lots of "chrome" should consider, especially if they show. Mucking twice a day will also cut your mucking time, since you begin each session with a relatively cleaner stall.

Cleaning twice with manure picked out at noon is sheer luxury, but most horse owners probably don't have schedules that allow them to muck three times a day. In pursuing your cleaning regimen, begin by taking your horse out of the stall; either turn the animal out for a daily romp or tie it. While most horses don't mind people working in their stalls, others seem to take perverse delight in standing directly over their urine spots so you can't do a through cleaning job.

After you've turned your horse out, tackle the water buckets, which yes, do play a role in a thorough stall mucking. While horses demand plentiful amounts of fresh water, dirty buckets lead to health hazards and dehydration. Hanging a plastic bucket with a snap hook is safe and makes for easy removal. Dump the old water far enough away from your barn so frozen or muddy rivulets won't cause safety hazards, then take some clean water and your scrub brush and scrub out the algae, bits of hay and clumps of grain that invariably collect in water buckets. If you can't find your scrub brush, make one out of hay. Take a fistful of hay, twist it so it forms a thick "broom," and use this to scrub inside the bucket.

If your horse has an automatic waterer in its stall, you will probably need to clean it less, but algae can develop in those located in sunny areas. Use this time to check that the waterer is functioning properly, and scoop out any debris that may have accumulated.

With the water bucket taken care of, move your wheelbarrow as near to the stable door as possible, arm yourself with your pitchfork and manure bucket, and enter the stall. Begin by forking large clumps of manure into your bucket. You'll want to take note of where and how much the horse defecates; if your horse is ill, you'll be able to recognize right away if the amount of manure varies considerably from one day to the next.

Most horses form a pattern in their stalls, so over time, you'll be able to clean the stall more quickly if you know the prime spots. Big piles are easy to fork up, but what about those pesky little ones that get away? One method is to shake the bedding through the tines of the pitchfork, working the stall from left to right, back to front. As long as you are systematic, you should be able to pick up the most manure for your time. You don't have to be obsessive about picking a stall, but the more manure you remove, the cleaner and happier your horse will be.

While you're at it, save yourself some money. Don't take out more bedding than necessary. By sifting quickly through the bedding, you'll be able to pick out the waste while leaving the clean bedding for another day. I was appalled one day while watching a friend pick out her stalls as she removed half the bedding, most of which was dry. Her excuse? "Takes

too much time to sift through the bedding every day." If you've got a cool million tucked away for shavings, keep on forking up those dry shavings, but unless you have a very messy horse, this is a big waste of money. As long as the bedding is dry, it can stay.

Next, dig up the urine spot in the stall. Generally, geldings use a spot somewhere near the middle of the stall. Mares are trickier but will often urinate near the back corners. Take out all of the bedding that seems wet or soiled, including any questionable bedding.

Finishing Touches

After you've dumped all the waste in the manure pile, take a quick look around the stall. Glance over the walls for loose nails and at the door for loose hinges. Nails sticking out from walls can scrape your horse, or worse, put out an eye. Push against your stall door to make sure your horse hasn't been loosening it, planning its exit. Spending one minute a day to check the safety of the premises is certainly worth the time if it prevents heartache and/or stacks of vet bills later on.

Now you can put some clean bedding in the stall, raking it through so it mingles with the older bedding. How deeply you bed your stalls is entirely up to you and how your barn is constructed. If your flooring is cement and you do without mats, you may want to bed your horse more deeply. Dirt flooring is easier on legs and feet, and you won't have to bed the stall as deeply as you would if you had concrete flooring. However, dirt or clay floors hold moisture, and clean-up of this flooring is generally more difficult than cement floors.

If you use stall mats, you will use even less bedding as your horse will have better cushioning on its legs and not need the deep footing. Use your own judgement and experiment according to your climate and your horse.

If your horse has cast itself in its stall in the past (gotten wedged against the wall and stuck so that it is unable to get up), you may want to bank extra bedding along the walls.

Some horses are truly "easy keepers" and willingly keep their stalls as neat as Felix Ungar's room. Others are the Oscar Madison type and seem to take great delight in hiding their manure from unwary grooms, grinding it into the bedding. There's not much you can do with these horses except grin and bear it. Picking out the stall more frequently is about the easiest way to deal with these messy animals; if you can catch the piles before your horse tap dances on them, you'll be able to remove them with greater ease.

With the bedding maintained, fill the water buckets, leave a flake of hay in the clean stall, and, if you have one, sweep the aisle. Nothing is worse than a clean stall and a filthy aisle. Scattered dry shavings and hay on the aisle floor are fire and health hazards, especially when dust and dirt collect with the mess. And speaking of fire, once a month, clean out those pesky cobwebs with a long-handled broom. Cobwebs and the dust that collects on them are fire hazards that are often overlooked by even the most careful horse owner.

Intensive Clean-Up

You should occasionally strip your horse's stall down to the bottom for a thorough cleaning. First, sweep the floor and walls thoroughly, then disinfect them. You can mix your own disinfectant by using a chlorine bleach and water solution. While you allow the flooring to dry, scrub your horse's feed bin with hot water and disinfectant. Remember to rinse everything completely.

Wet spots in a dirt or clay floor may have to be dug out. Some horse owners sprinkle lime powder (calcium hydroxide) over the areas in the stall that are wet most often. Lime can cause skin irritation, however, so if you sprinkle lime, bed this area well.

Store your mucking tools properly. Hang pitchforks so they cannot be stepped on by a horse or person. Brooms should also be hung so that they keep their shape and remain clean. Keep smaller items with your other barn supplies in the tack room or utility shed.

Now your barn is clean and shining, safe and sound. Go ahead and bring your horse home. The animal will be happier and healthier by far, for now its home is neat and clean, warm and dry — a veritable equine palace.

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