BEATING THE WINTER CHILL

To blanket or not to blanket - that is the question! Just because the temperatures are dropping outside, don’t run out and wrap your horse from head to hoof just yet. Mother Nature has given your horse plenty of protection from the elements and by putting a blanket on your horse, you may be doing more harm than good!

Ever wonder how your horse knows when to start growing that winter coat? You won’t catch him checking the thermometer – a horse’s coat grows in response to the length of daylight! As the days start to become shorter in the fall, the horse’s body responds by growing more hair. (The same thing applies in the spring when the days become longer and the horse loses his winter coat.) Your horse’s winter coat helps to trap heat next to the body and provide insulation from the cold. Even in frigid conditions, your horse is usually warm and toasty in his natural coat.

Even the most woolly of horses may need a little extra protection from time to time. Your horse’s coat may not be enough to keep him warm if there are strong, cold winds and rain. Horses that will be outside benefit from a three-sided shelter to help protect them from the elements. The shelter should be designed to face away from the prevailing winds and should be located in a site that is well drained in order to keep your horse from standing in the mud. By having a shelter available, your horse can get out of the wind and rain to help keep warm. In addition, your horse’s digestive tract produces heat during the process of digesting forages. So during those times when it gets especially cold, provide your horse with additional hay or grass to help them stay warm. Adding additional grain doesn’t provide this same benefit.

When choosing to blanket your horse, either do it right or not at all. If your horse stays outdoors for long periods of time and may get caught in the rain, choose a waterproof blanket. A horse with a wet blanket will be in worse shape than one with no blanket at all! Even in very cold conditions, healthy, non-blanketed horses (especially those with run-in shelters!) are well equipped to handle the cold and will be fine. A horse that is blanketed loses the ability to “fluff” his hair and trap body heat to stay warm. So once you decide to blanket your horse, stick to it! With his natural protection compromised, your horse will be depending on you for his warmth!
Have you taken a soil sample lately? If not, what are you waiting for? If you haven’t taken one in the last 3 or 4 years, plan to do that this winter. It’s easy and, best of all, it’s FREE! The earlier you can send your sample to the lab, the quicker you’ll get it back. In the spring months, the NCDA lab receives a very large number of soil samples to process and it may take them up to 10-12 weeks or more to get your sample results back to you. This could create a problem if you want to plant a warm season grass in the spring and would like to have the test report back before you plant. If you can get your samples to the lab before the rush, you can have your results back in as little as a two weeks.

Are you wondering why you should bother taking a soil sample? In order to manage your pastures so that they’ll benefit you the most, it’s important to know what condition the soil is in. Is the soil too acidic? Have you added enough phosphorus? Is poor soil fertility causing the problems you are having with weeds? These are all questions that your soil sample can help you answer! If you’re having trouble with weeds in your pasture, it could be because the pH of your soil is too low (too acidic) and you need to add more lime. If your grass isn’t performing as well as it should, it could be because you haven’t added enough fertilizer.

A soil test can also save you money by giving you recommendations on how much fertilizer or lime you need to apply. You could be wasting money putting out more lime or fertilizer than you really need. In addition, if the pH of your soil is incorrect, it may limit how much of your fertilizer the grass can actually use. Fertilizer is expensive so don’t make it harder on the pocketbook than it needs to be!

In order to take a soil sample, you’ll need a clean plastic bucket and a soil probe or a shovel. The goal is to take a representative sample of all of the soil in the pasture. In order to do this, take about 15 “cores” from various areas in the field that all have similar soil color and soil texture. If you have a sandy area in one half of your pasture and heavy clay or organic soil in another area, you’ll want to take 2 separate soil samples for each area.

Also, be sure that the total area you’re sampling and including in one box is not over 10 acres. This helps to keep your test results more accurate. Sample down to a depth of 4-6’ in the various locations. Once you’re finished, mix the “cores” together evenly and then fill up the soil sample box. Soil sampling forms and boxes are available at no charge at the Extension office.

If you need help figuring out how many samples you need or how to go about taking the samples, feel free to call the Extension office. We also have soil probes that we can loan you to help make the sampling a little easier.

Winter is here once again and, for many, it’s time to start feeding more hay. If you haven’t already secured a load of hay for the winter, you need to make plans to do so as soon as possible. As the winter progresses, it becomes harder to find high quality hay. If you already bought hay, did you buy enough? And if you haven’t bought your winter supply yet, do you know how much you need?

First of all, let’s clear up some of the nutritional terminology that we often use when working with hay. When we say “dry matter”, we’re talking about how much of the weight of the hay is actually moisture. If we remove all of the moisture from a sample of hay and completely dry it down, the portion of the sample that remains is the dry matter content of that sample. If we talk about an “as fed” basis, this means we’re taking the moisture content of the hay into account when dealing with the weight of the hay. On average, a horse needs to consume about 2% of its body weight each day on a dry matter basis to meet its nutrient requirements. Since most hay is about 90% dry matter (the other 10% is just moisture), we’ll need to factor that into our calculations when determining how much hay the horse will need to eat. So we’ll actually have to feed slightly more than 2% of the horse’s body weight on an “as fed” basis in order to meet the required dry matter amounts because of the moisture content of the hay. Make sense?
Let’s assume that we have 4 imaginary horses who weigh approximately 1000 lbs each. (You can estimate your horse’s weight by using a weight tape, which can usually be found at feed stores or ag supply companies. Weight tapes can be quite accurate when used correctly.) In our imaginary pastures at our imaginary farm, we have no cool season grasses or winter annuals, so we have no grazing until our warm season grasses grow again in the spring. We need to plan to feed our 4 horses hay for 5 months.

Each horse, who weighs 1000 lbs and eats 2% of its body weight each day, will eat about 20 lbs on a dry matter basis each day. If we divide the 20 lbs by the dry matter content of our hay (90%), we get 22.2 lbs of hay. This means that we need to plan on feeding each horse about 22 lbs of hay on an as fed basis in order to meet the requirement of 20 lbs on a dry matter basis. Still with me? We’re almost finished!

If each horse eats 22 lbs of hay per day, then 4 horses will eat 88 lbs per day. Assuming there are 30 days in a month and we’re feeding for 5 months, we’ll be feeding hay for approximately 150 days. So if we feed 88 lbs of hay for 150 days, we’ll need 13,200 lbs of hay! Since there are 2,000 lbs in a ton, that comes out to be 6.6 tons of hay.

Keep in mind several things though. Having access to pasture will reduce the amount of hay that needs to be fed each day. Also, if your horse is getting a concentrate in addition to hay each day, then some of his nutrient needs are being met by the concentrate and he’ll actually eat less than 2% of his body weight in hay each day. Because forages (including hay and pasture) are extremely important to the overall health of the digestive tract, they should always make up the majority of your horse’s diet. Never let your horse’s daily intake of forage go below 1% of his body weight. Occasionally weigh a flake (or pad) of your hay to get an idea of how much hay your horse is actually eating. This can be done using a postal scale or produce scale. A flake can easily range in weight from 3-5 pounds. So if you feed 3 flakes of hay, you could be feeding as little as 9 pounds or as much as 15 lbs of hay! How heavy are your flakes of hay?

Lastly, buy a little more hay than you think you’ll need. Some hay will be wasted by the horses and you might lose a few bales to poor storage. It’s better to have a few more bales on hand than you actually need than to get in a situation where you need a few more bales and you don’t have them.

The volunteers of REINS (Regional Equine Information Network System) and BItS (Benefiting Intracoastal Trails) have been working very hard for some time to secure additional equestrian trails in the Croatan National Forest. The original Pine Cliff trail has become a very popular location for area trail riders to spend a day riding and you can find horse trailers parked near the picnic area on almost any given weekend. Some of you may be aware that the Forestry Service has been working to secure additional trails in the Pine Cliff area. We received official word in October that these trails had been approved and construction would begin in late fall of 2009. The project will consist of 16 miles of dedicated equestrian trails and a large parking area at the trail head with space for horse trailers. It may take up to two years to complete construction of the project. We hope that area riders will continue to use the trails in this region and invite others to join them. At a time when many open spaces are being lost to development or closed to equestrian use, we are extremely fortunate to have these local trails for our use and to have the support of the Forestry Service.

Website for more info on all short courses listed:
http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/an_sci/extension/horse/Webpages/NCSU_EHH_Home.html

**DECEMBER**

**5-6th** - NCSU Open Horse Show – Contact Robin Lynn @ (919) 515-5784 or robin_lynn@ncsu.edu

**5th** – Hunter Jumper show @ Equine Country, Jacksonville

**6-7th** – NCSU Open Horse Show Judges Certification Course – Raleigh
10-12th – NCSU Horse Breeding Short Course – Raleigh

13th – NCSU Foaling Management Short Course – Raleigh

12th – Eastern Dressage and Combined Training Assoc @ Clay Hill Stables, New Bern

28-31st – Raleigh Indoor Holiday Classic “A” show – Hunt Horse Complex, Raleigh

JANUARY

8-10th – AQHA Novice Judging Short Course – Raleigh

10-11th – NCSU Advanced Level Judging Short Course – Raleigh

19th – Extension Horse Husbandry Webinar – “Feeding to Reduce Colic”

24th – NCSU Advanced Level Breeding Short Course – Raleigh

28-31st – Raleigh Winter Hunter Show – Hunt Horse Complex, Raleigh

SPOTLIGHT

Holiday Safety Tips

The holidays are an exciting time of year for everyone. Here are some tips to help ensure a safe holiday season.

Trees
- When purchasing an artificial tree, look for the label "Fire Resistant."
- When purchasing a live tree always check for freshness. A fresh tree is less of a fire hazard. Fresh trees are green, with needles that are hard to pull from branches and do not break easily. The trunk should be sticky with resin.
- When setting up a tree at home, cut a few inches off the trunk of your tree to expose fresh wood. This allows for better water absorption. Be sure to keep the stand filled with water. Heated rooms can dry live trees out rapidly.
- Place trees away from fireplaces, radiators or portable heaters, out of walkways, and don't allow it to block doorways.

Lights
- Make sure all lights you use outdoors have been certified for outdoor use. Plug all outdoor electric decorations into circuits with ground fault circuit interrupters.
- Check all tree lights-even if they are new to make sure all the bulbs are working and that there are no frayed wires or loose connections.
- Turn off all lights when you go to bed or leave the house.

Decorations
- Use only non-combustible or flame-resistant materials to trim a tree. Choose tinsel or artificial icicles of plastic or nonleaded metals.
- Never use lighted candles on a tree or near other evergreens. Use non-flammable holders, and place candles where they won’t fall down.
- In homes with small children, take care to avoid decorations that are sharp or breakable, keep trimmings with small removable parts out of the reach of children. Avoid trimmings that resemble candy or food that may tempt a child to eat them.
- Remove wrapping paper, bags, ribbons and bows from tree and fireplace areas after gifts are opened. These items can pose suffocation and choking hazards to a small child, or can cause a fire if near flame.

Toy Safety
- Select toys to suit the age, abilities, skills and interest level of the receiver. Toys that are too advanced may pose safety hazards.
- To prevent burns and electrical shocks don't give children, under age ten, a toy that must be plugged into an electrical outlet.
Strings and ribbons that are more than 12 inches in length could be a strangulation hazard. Remove them from toys before giving them to young children.

Visiting
- When traveling in the car make sure everyone is buckled up and stays that way.
- Remember that homes you visit may not be childproofed. Watch for danger spots.
- Traveling, visiting, getting presents, shopping, etc., can all increase a child's stress levels. Stick to children's usual eating and sleeping schedules as much as possible to help you and them enjoy the holidays and reduce stress.

Fireplaces
- Before lighting any fire, remove all greens, boughs, papers, and other decorations from fireplace area. Make sure the flue is open.
- Do not burn wrapping papers in the fireplace they ignite suddenly and burn intensely.

Pets
- People food is not good for pets it can cause gastrointestinal upset. Do not give poultry bones to your pets, they can splinter and cause severe injury. Onions can be toxic to both dogs and cats. Chocolate can cause a fatal heart attack if ingested in large doses.

During the holidays, pets may not understand why their usually quiet home is full of people and noise. Provide pets with a quiet place to retreat to help them be more at ease. Also, keep an eye on pets when doors are opening and closing frequently, upset pets may slip out in the commotion.

Decorations usually mean extra cords and plugs -- tempting "chew toys" for pets. Take an extra minute or two during decorating to tape down or cover cords.

Anchoring the top of the tree to the ceiling with a strong cord will help keep it in place around frolicking pets. Some pets are inclined to eat tinsel hanging from trees -- this can cause an intestinal obstruction – avoid tinsel or keep tinsel decorations high on the tree.

Mistletoe and holly berries, as well as poinsettia plants can be poisonous to pets. Pine needles can puncture holes in a pet’s intestine causing an emergency visit to the vet. Use repellent sprays to keep pets away from areas and objects that may cause them harm.

Have a safe and happy Holiday!