



Breathe easier by making the most of the season's barn cleaning inspirations.

The urge to purge, clean and de-clutter is in the air as the March 20 arrival of spring looms. Barns big and small benefit from an at-least annual application of serious broom, vacuum, elbow grease and re-organization. Dust, cobwebs and accumulations of generally yucky stuff in nooks and crannies are the enemies of a healthy horsekeeping environment. Clutter impedes efficient stable workflow and safe passage through the barn, so that should be tackled, too.

Clean air is critical to horse's health, happiness and performance, but the equine environment is an especially challenging place to maintain it. The essentials of hay and bedding bring an inherent respiratory risk of dust particles to the stable. Dirt floors compound matters, along with footing material and mud brought inside as horses come and go from their stalls. Even a short lapse in basic stable maintenance can quickly escalate these threats to the horse's easy breathing. This is especially true in winter, when stall and stable doors and windows are closed to keep out cold and wet. Air pollutants have nowhere to go but round and round and into the horse's airway and lungs.

Those nagging coughs that elude diagnosis? Poor air quality is likely the cause.

Start At The Top

Things will get worse before they get better. The first step toward clean stable air is the messy process of shaking loose dust and dirt from rafters, corners and behind and underneath piles of

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hay, trunks, doors, equipment, etc. Horses should be nowhere near this endeavor. Pick a day when you can turn horses out or keep them somewhere else, well away from the stable. Mind your own respiratory health, too. Consider a surgical mask or tie a bandana over your nose and mouth to keep out the big particles.

It's a good day to wear clothes you don't care about.

Use a broom and ladder to rid the rafters of spider webs and nests. Nesting birds might seem harmless guests, but they're also disease carriers. Plus, the straw, mud, bits and bobs used to construct their nests add to air quality challenges. Gently relocate the nest somewhere far from the barn, handling it with gloves for your own safety and to prevent your human scent from scaring away the inhabitant.

Spider webs, dust, lint and fibers are also nasty fire threats: another reason to rid them.

Work your way down each stall wall, looking for loose nails and baseboards, splintered wood and other dangers. Plan ahead to strip stall bedding near the end of its life cycle. Haul out loose stall mats and powerwash them outside, ideally with a disinfectant, and let them air dry completely. Examine the floor for depressions that are or could become places for urine to accumulate, with the unhealthy ammonia odors that come with that. The floor underneath waterers and stall mat seams are common wet spots. Let them dry out completely, using a fan to accelerate the process if the base is hard packed enough not to fly loose and add more dust to the air. Then level the surface by filling the holes with an absorbent base material.

Dry depressions in the floor often result from the horse pawing excessively. That could be a symptom for something as simple as boredom or as serious as anxiety, stress or physical discomfort. Monitor that behavior and ask a veterinarian about it.

Check the hardware on stall doors, feeders, waterers, etc., to ensure no sharp spurs have emerged. Test that sliding doors are running smoothly in their tracks.

Moving into the barn aisle, haul tack boxes and other equipment away from the wall to remove the dirt and debris behind it. Empty trunks and storage cabinets and do a brutal round of "keep, toss or donate?" before checking that "keeper" items are in good shape. If so, clean them and return them. Do the same in the tack room and grooming area. It's a great time to examine all

saddle, bridle and other tack parts for signs of unusual wear or threat of breakage, followed by another round of “keep, toss or donate?”

Stand back and examine the big picture of each barn aisle, tack room and grooming area. Is there a “place for everything and everything in its place?” Blankets, bandages, grooming supplies? If not, consider what combination of shelving, cabinets and storage bins are needed to achieve that.

Keep It Clean

Getting the barn clean is one thing and keeping it that way is another. Happily, many challenges can be mitigated by proactive barn management, especially your approach to two of the biggest culprits in poor air quality: shavings and hay.

Stall conditions are ground zero for air quality. Daily removal of manure and soiled bedding is the obvious starting point, but thinking beyond that to what’s underneath that bedding is the key to long-term clean air.

Horse owners often think “more is better” when it comes to shavings. The human eye sees a nice, cushy surface to support their horse’s sweet dreams, but the horse’s lungs see an onslaught of respiratory irritants that come with that deep bedding. Padded and sealed flooring systems like those pioneered by ComfortStall® are an ideal way to reduce bedding requirements to only as much as needed to absorb urine. They provide plenty of cush without compromising air quality. And, preventing urine from seeping below the flooring, as happens with individual mats, also prevents the build-up of urea and bacteria that leads to ammonia, a major airway irritant. While upfront installation costs are nothing to sneeze at, they are quickly recouped (usually in less than a year) by decreases in stall maintenance and bedding purchase and disposal expenses. Best of all, horses and their humans breathe easier.

Absorbent base materials like D&G are better options than dirt-only flooring, and rubber stall mats are helpful except where gaps exist between them.

Moving on to hay, even the highest quality, most expensive varieties arrive with spores, bacteria

and allergens that compromise equine respiratory health – and yours, too.

Checking hay before buying it, or on arrival, for discolorations or odors that indicate mold is an obvious first step. Next is storing it in a well-ventilated, rodent-free area, separate from where the horses live. Bales should be elevated off the ground to prevent moisture accumulation: wooden shipping pallets are handy for this.

Buying large quantities of hay often secures the best per-bale price. Balance that with the prospect of having to store hay so long that its dust, allergen and irritant content increases. Local climate and the bale's original moisture content are the main variables that affect how long hay can safely be stored.

Steaming is the best way to rid hay of its respiratory risks. By injecting high volume steam, at a temperature exceeding 212° degrees Fahrenheit, thermal hay steaming chests made by HayGain® reduce breathable particles up to 99 percent. The process also kills mold, bacteria, fungal spores and mites, providing much cleaner air for horses and their humans.

Ventilation is a horsekeeper's best friend in maintaining clean air in the stable. Capitalize on it by making dust, debris and cobweb removal a regular part of the barn maintenance routine, minimizing its quantity in circulating air. Horses thrive in temperatures colder than what humans generally prefer. Forty-five to 75 degrees is a comfortable range for most, so keep barn doors and windows open even if you need to bundle up yourself.

Commit to returning equipment, supplies and tools to those storage solutions determined back in the cleaning phase. Just as in riding and training horses, doing the basics right applies equally to keeping the barn clean and horses breathing easy.

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