

Horse Water Source More Important In Winter

Water is the most important nutrient for horses and may actually be more important in the winter than the summer.

While it is common sense to most horse owners that water is essential at all times, to others it might be a requirement that is forgotten or overlooked.

"Water is necessary for almost every bodily function of a horse," emphasized Dr. Judy Marteniuk, Michigan State Extension equine veterinarian.

"During cold weather, especially if the humidity is high, a horse's thirst mechanism does not always function as efficient as in the summer," Marteniuk insisted.

Water is lost from a horse's body through urine, feces and moisture in breath. "If a horse is working during cold weather, significant water can be lost from sweating," the Extension veterinarian stated.

Dehydration occurs if a horse loses too much water. "A 3 to 4 percent loss of body water will cause mild dehydration," Marteniuk related.

Most adult horses require 10 to 12 gallons of water a day for their basic needs. "There are some horses which will only consume half that much and remain healthy, but they are the exception because their kidneys have the ability to concentrate urine and recycle more water back into the body," Marteniuk explained.

Two common problems resulting from inadequate water during cold weather are decreased feed intake and an even more harmful impaction colic.

"One of the first signs of impaction colic is decreased manure production and drier feces," Marteniuk informed. "As the problem worsens, the horse will show pain, including pawing, laying down and rolling." A veterinarian should be called if pain is observed.

"Early detection means the impaction can usually be resolved without surgery," Marteniuk stressed. "If the horse only has drier

feces and decreased manure production, increasing the horse's water consumption may ward off colic and a veterinary visit."

Best temperature for horse water is 45 to 65 degrees. "However consumption often decreases if the temperature is lower," according to Marteniuk.

A study indicates that warming horse water helps increase consumption. "It is probably not necessary to greatly increase water temperature, but it might be worthwhile for older horses, those with low consumption and for horses with a history of impaction," she said.

Increasing salt intake will stimulate a horse to drink more. About two ounces of salt are needed by a 1,000-pound horse daily. Salt is included in commercial grain mixes, but it should also be offered free choice in a block or loose.

"If water consumption is

still low, a spoonful of table salt can be top dressed on feed. Salt can also be given orally in a slurry mix and administered with a syringe," Marteniuk recommended.

Snow and ice are not adequate water sources. "Occasionally a horse will eat snow and reduce water intake somewhat, but that does not change their needs for fresh water," the veterinarian indicated.

Importance of water to horses has become more of a concern this winter as typical water sources, such as ponds, creeks, springs and wells have dried up or become seriously low due to drought conditions.

First off, Marteniuk warned that horses can become stuck in mud around drying water holes. "They often struggle, become exhausted, dehydrated and can even die in a short time

in cold weather," Marteniuk recognized.

A warning was also expressed about horses getting on water sources when they become frozen solid during long spells of low temperatures. "Horses will sometimes walk out on frozen ponds or streams, fall down and be unable to get up. They can quickly succumb in this situation too," she added.

Likewise, horses can break through the ice that is thinner farther away from the shoreline. "If nobody finds the horse in a short time, death can occur," the veterinarian continued.

Another concern when horses are drinking out of low-volume natural water sources is toxic algae. "We do not typically think about quality of water out of ponds or streams, but sometimes water composition can be

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harmful, even deadly," the specialist confirmed.

While a clean, open water source is best for horses, in some situations that is not possible. "When ice must be broken for horses, it is important to do it as often as possible every day, and at the same location. Horses must know where and when to drink," Marteniuk analyzed.

Horses can learn to come to water sources on a regular basis, but it's essential to make sure that they know where the water is and to drink. "Water will often freeze back up in minutes, and the horses will not get their requirements, if they are not there when the water is opened," the veterinarian warned.

Some horse owners are restoring windmills to provide water in dry pastures this winter. "These work well in most situations, but it is important to make sure the water does not freeze, or

at least that there is an open hole allowing for water consumption," the specialist cautioned. "If the windmill system has a drain back pipe, it's essential to make sure no contaminated water goes back into the well."

Water consumption can be monitored when horses are watered from a bucket in a stall. "The horse needs two buckets of fresh water twice a day," Marteniuk prescribed.

Heaters in tanks and for individual stall water are sometimes convenient, but they can become expensive and can be hazardous. "Those water heaters really pull the electricity," Marteniuk evaluated. "A greater concern though is if wires are pulled out of the heaters or if they are shorted. A horse can be electrocuted, and there have been several barns burn down from fires caused by water heater malfunction."

Horsemen over the years

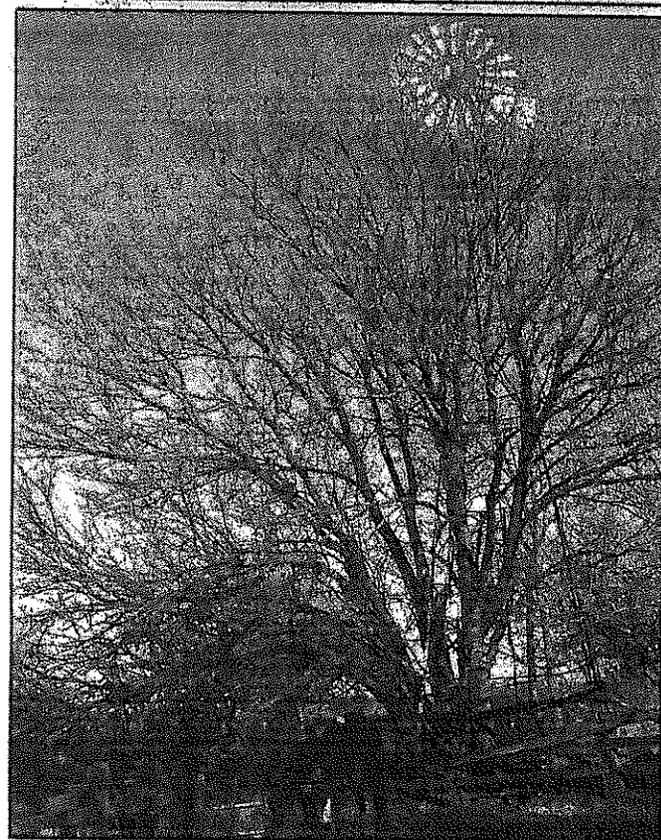
have devised a number of insulation and warming systems that work well to provide open water in large tanks during freezing conditions. Marteniuk suggested using two large garbage cans of different sizes, placing insulation in one and inserting the second smaller one inside, with an insulated lid, including an opening to allow consumption. "These are simple, inexpensive and work well in many situations," she granted.

Various products are available commercially for watering during freezing weather. Some of these are

merely insulated buckets with floats that horses learn to press down to get water. "One of the problems is that they have to be refilled on a regular basis," Marteniuk pointed out.

Water sources, when used for several horses, must be set up such that one horse doesn't hog the area and prevent timid horses from consumption, Marteniuk warned.

"No matter the season or what a horse is doing, they really need free choice water at all times if it is possible," Marteniuk concluded.



A windmill that hadn't pumped for over 25 years has been called into action to water horses where a pond and creek have dried up due to drought conditions. Trees have grown around and through the tower, pump leathers had deteriorated in the pipe and the tank had rusted full of holes. Still, clear water in the 88-foot drilled well is abundant for supplying needs this winter.

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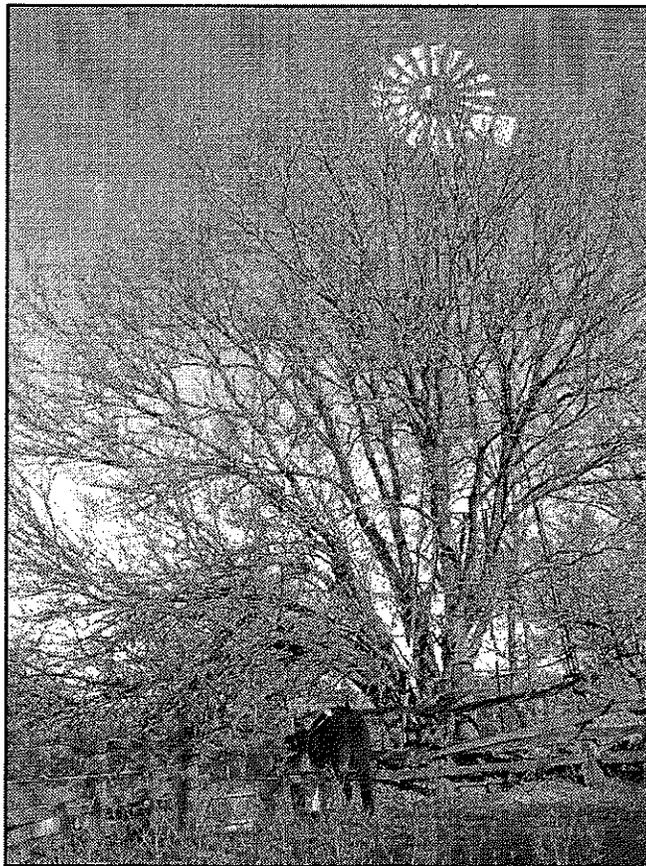
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