

Wintering animals

With the arrival of winter comes the question of wintering horses that live outdoors most of the year. Keeping the animals healthy, the need for daily exercise, preserving the pastures for the following spring... the winter period is restrictive but does not necessarily mean that animals need to return indoors. Wintering outdoors is at least partly possible, provided that the horses are managed in a way that is appropriate for the available meadows, and that particular attention is paid to the animals, especially when climatic conditions are unfavourable.

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Technical level 



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Preserving meadows during winter

It is possible to keep your horses outdoors during winter, but it does mean **adapting the way the pasture is managed in order to preserve its quality** for the following spring.

Grazing as long as the soil is load-bearing

The load bearing capacity of the soil is a good indicator as to whether horses can be left outdoors without damaging the pasture.

Rotating pasture



If the soil has good load-bearing capacity and the load is appropriate, horses can stay outdoors with no risk of damaging the pasture © N. Genoux

As long as the soil has good load-bearing capacities, **rotation over several pastures** allows horses to be grazed with or without a moderate supply of forage between mid-November and the end of January. The animals are moved to another parcel as soon as the first has been consumed (minimum 5-6 cm of grass remaining) or when the cover deteriorates too much (depending on the rainfall).

Continuous grazing on large grassy areas

Where a large area of grass is available, **extensive grazing** (e.g. 0.5 to 1 ha/horse depending on the load bearing capacity of the soil and weather conditions) may be practised.



Remember to check the condition of the fences. As hedges are less dense in winter, any barbed wire fences that may be present are more visible

Respect a rest period of at least 2 months



Pastures are allowed to rest to promote the healthy regrowth of plant cover. © N. Genoux

In any case, it is essential to **allow pastures a certain amount of rest during the winter period to encourage good regrowth of the plant cover** the following **spring** and thus ensure the sustainability of the pasture. A minimum period of **two to three months without animals in the parcels** allows the plants to rest. They will not be trampled on or grazed down to their roots, as horses can do in winter.

A break in January-February during rotational grazing

During the wettest period, from January to February, the rotation pattern is interrupted to occupy only one grazing parcel known as the "sacrificial" parcel,

allowing the other parcels set aside for spring grazing to have two to three months' rest.

A pause before grass growth in the case of continuous grazing

A two -three month rest period before plants start to regrow for pastures planned for spring grazing is essential. However, if the parcel is not used until the end of spring (e.g. parcels intended for harvesting), it may be possible for winter grazing to take place until the end of winter.



It is beneficial to graze the grass in autumn to obtain a short and homogeneous plant cover in winter. This will promote better regrowth of grass in the spring. A mild autumn (until the first frosts) allows the grass to continue to grow. This provides a sufficient source of food for horses with low or moderate requirements. However, be careful not to overgraze (not below 5-6 cm) to avoid damaging the spring regrowth.

Choose the type of accommodation according to the available space

The idea that horses must be taken indoors in winter is wrong. Horses are much more resistant to the cold than you might think and can actually stay outdoors for much (if not almost all) of the year. In reality, it is the available grazing areas that determines the choice of accommodation.

Stabling or stabilised area with shelter if there are insufficient grassy areas.

Collective accommodation in a stable or stabilised area with a shelter is the solution commonly chosen when the forage areas are insufficient in relation to the number of horses to be accommodated. This ensures that all the pastures are preserved during the winter and that the animals are kept dry and sheltered. It is possible for the horses to move about, but this remains limited. Several recommendations in terms of m²/horse are given: on average 6 to 10 m²/horse.



When there is a hard frost, it is possible to take the horses out provided that the ground cover has not deteriorated during rainy periods (risk of fractures, sprains, foot abscesses...).

Entirely outdoors if there is sufficient grass



When there is enough space available, it is possible for horses to remain entirely outdoors in winter.

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Full outdoor wintering is possible, provided that sufficient grassy areas are available. A **feeding area with rack(s)** can be set up to supplement the horses with forage when grass is sparse. The topsoil must first be loosened and then limestone or wood chips must be added within a radius of 10 m around the rack. This prevents the ground from being broken up by trampling and thus prevents muddy areas from appearing; horses can feed themselves cleanly, without stagnating in mud up to their knees. The plot of land set aside for feeding is then "**sacrificed**".

Feeding and ensuring free access to water

Depending on the amount of grass available and the weather conditions, it is often necessary to supplement the feed with forages. Special attention must also be paid to ensuring free access to water.

Feeding

Forage (hay, wrapped and silage) is the main feed required for horses kept outdoors when grass resources are sparse. It also constitutes the main food source for horses housed in stables or on a stabilised area with shelter, which are being maintained or with little exercise.

When to add forage?



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When weather conditions deteriorate, and grass resource becomes depleted, self-service forage can be provided. The horses will appreciate this all the more the weather is very wet, in periods of snow or frost. The addition of hay will limit the horses turning to other plants that are likely to be "attacked" but which should be preserved (trees, hedges). In addition, some of these various plants can be a source of food poisoning.

How to provide forage?



Anti-waste hay net © P. Doligez

Quality fodder, i.e. that which is harvested early, and which is richer, is reserved for **breeding horses with high requirements** (pregnant broodmares, growing foals...) and horses with regular physical activity. Horses with low needs, i.e. those which are on a maintenance diet or which do little exercise, will be satisfied with **less rich fodder**, harvested late.

The rack, which is filled from the outside, is ideal for **limiting the formation of ruts** in the pasture. Putting forage on the ground is more wasteful but has the advantage of making it possible to easily change the location and limit damage to the soil.

To save money, bales can be covered with a **small-mesh net** to limit the spread of hay on the ground.

It is important to make sure there are areas where all the animals can reach the forage, in particular horses which are dominated, **by spacing out a number of different forage areas**.

Adding concentrates

Horses on a maintenance diet or those performing light work can be fed mainly grass and forage in winter. The use of concentrates should be reserved for animals with high requirements (growing foals, gestating mares or lactating mares, old horses prone to weight loss).

The addition of concentrates can be a source of conflict within a group of horses, and it should be avoided or carefully managed, especially when a few non-dominant horses within the group need to receive supplements. If necessary, these animals should be isolated in order to feed them individually and to avoid aggression from other horses in the group. It is easier to manage horses when there are homogeneous groups of animals (with the same feeding requirements).

Water and minerals

Water



Check daily access to water, especially during frosty periods
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When dry feed is given (hay, wrapped), the need for water increases. In any case, an **operational watering system** close to the feeding area is essential (automatic drinkers, antifreeze systems, etc.). During periods of low temperatures:

- **Anticipate frost and fill up non-automatic water sources in advance** to avoid needing to supply water when the pipes are frozen;

- When it has frozen, **it is better to break the ice on a small area of the container's surface than to remove the entire block of ice** every time. The smaller the amount of water in the container, the thicker the film of ice. Placing a stick across in the water (provided the horses do not touch it) limits the build-up of ice;
- **Shut off and drain automatic water inlets** to keep them from freezing over.

Minerals

A **self-service salt block** should be positioned, preferably at height (on a post, inside the shelter) to prevent it from dissolving into the ground.

Certain things to look out for in horses' behaviour in the winter

In addition to housing and feeding, other things should be borne in mind when managing horses in the winter.

Assessing body condition

Longer coats can lead to **errors in the visual assessment of how fat the animal is**. It is important to gauge the thickness of the fatty tissue by pressing a flat palm of the hand onto the ribs, withers and pedicle. That way, it will be easier to interpret the body condition score (NEC). Much like the rest of the year, body condition should be regularly monitored to adapt the animal's diet if need be.



An adult horse or pony can lose weight in the winter ($2 \leq \text{NEC} \leq 2.5$) and regain it when the grass grows ($3.5 \leq \text{NEC} \leq 4$). They can "yoyo" like this without harming their health.

Paying special attention to fragile animals

In winter, special attention should be paid to **young and old horses**, which are more sensitive than adults. These horses are often dominated by the others and do not always have **access to the available feed when they need it**. Also, their **immune protection** against diseases is not acquired (young) or is declining (old horses).

Inspect limbs and body regularly



In winter be careful of humidity © N. Genoux

Horses' limbs are prone to **infection** when there is excessive **mud or moisture**. You should check regularly for **cracks and/or scabs** on the fetlocks and coronets, as these are the main signs of **dermatophilosis** or **scabies**. It is even more important to monitor horses with white socks, which have more sensitive skin. The tip of the tail can be cut just below the hock to limit mud build-up in the hair, which can cause wet rubbing along the limbs.

The **feet** must be checked and regularly maintained (condition of the horn, condition of the shoes on shod horses...). **Abscesses** causing severe lameness are more common in the winter period. **Moisture** can also damage the feet and can cause various problems.

For horses wearing a **blanket**, **injuries caused by friction** should be regularly checked (withers, tips of shoulders, where the girth passes inside the thighs) by removing the blanket completely. The same applies to **waterproofing** around the kidney area and at the seams of the blanket.



Better an uncovered horse than a wet horse under its blanket!

If necessary, help certain categories of horses to withstand low temperatures



A clean and waterproof cover, only if necessary © N. Genoux

Maintenance requirements corresponds to the amount of energy needed for the horse's life and activity when it is not producing (lactation, gestation, work) to maintain a constant weight in its thermal neutral zone. In temperate climates, the thermal comfort zone, the range in which the body does not have to expend any additional energy to maintain the body's internal temperature, is between +5°C to +25°C. For adult horses adapted to cold weather conditions, this range is between -10°C and +16°C. Thus, **horses are largely capable of withstanding low temperatures in winter** without human intervention. This is why they can be accommodated all year round outdoors, provided that they can shelter from the prevailing winds (natural shelter made up of trees, hedges, copses) and rain (artificial shelter), which increase the effects of low temperatures.

Wearing a blanket should be reserved for those **animals most likely be in poor condition** (old horses) or those that need to maintain a clean coat (working horses for example).



Overweight animals should not be covered to benefit from the winter to help them lose weight before the next grazing season.

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