

# COSYING UP

THERE'S NOTHING MORE SATISFYING THAN TUCKING YOUR HORSE UP IN A COSY STABLE ADORNED WITH A THICK, FLUFFY BED. **STEPHANIE BATEMAN** TAKES A LOOK AT THE DIFFERENT BEDDING OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO HORSE OWNERS THIS WINTER.

**G**olden stalks of straw, fluffy white shavings or moisture-soaking pellets – there seems to be no end of bedding products available nowadays, so what are the options, and which one is best for your horse?

A BETA National Equestrian Survey in 2019 found that: 53% of private horse owners bought shavings, 32% straw, 20% wooden pellets, 6% rubber matting, 7% hemp and flax, 1% paper and 11% other materials.

However, straw may be in short supply this year – with the exceptionally wet early spring and dry summer, farmers have struggled to produce the usual yield of straw. So, how will this affect owners?

“Wheat straw is the most common type used for bedding and it has not been a good season in terms of crop yields,” explains Claire Williams, Executive Director of BETA. “Some crops had to be ploughed up and re-

sown because they didn't establish well and there is no doubt it's going to be a challenging year. As with many things, it's very regional and depends where you are and how you get your straw, but it looks likely that demand will be high and that will drive the price up.”

Claire's advice is to get your supplies in now.

“Find a source and get your bedding earlier than you would otherwise,” she says. “If you need to, look at alternatives now rather than leaving it to the last minute.”

## STRAW

One of the cheapest and most commonly used beddings, it is made from the stems of wheat, barley or oat crops, with oat straw the most absorbent. Although fairly lightweight to carry around in small bales, straw must be stored in a damp-free environment to prevent bales going mouldy.

A thick, fluffy straw bed looks welcoming, but it isn't the most absorbent and some horses

are prone to eating it.

Recent developments in straw-based beddings included chopped and treated straw products that are dust extracted, offering easier handling and greater absorbency as well as being suitable for horses with respiratory issues.

Straw pellets, such as Sun-e-bed, are said to be dust-free, quick and easy to work with and result in a small muck heap. Being made of straw, they use an annual by-product and waste removed from the stable provides a nitrogen-rich compost. ▶

**ABOVE:** HORSE OWNERS HAVE A WIDER CHOICE OF BEDDING THAN EVER BEFORE. WOOD PELLETS SUCH AS SORBEO PICTURED HERE HAVE GAINED POPULARITY FOR THEIR LOW LABOUR REQUIREMENT.

**INSET:** RENOWNED FOR BEING CHEAP, AESTHETICALLY APPEALING AND EASY TO SOURCE, STRAW IS LIKELY TO BE IN SHORT SUPPLY THIS YEAR.





## MUCK HEAP MAINTENANCE

Getting rid of your muck heap needn't be a headache. Steph Croxford has her muck heap spread over her haylage fields where it acts as a fertiliser.

"We pay the local farmer £200 to come and spread it on our haylage fields," explains Steph. "We use chopped rape straw for bedding which mulches down really quickly. This year we got 36 large round bales of haylage from 3.5 acres. The local gardeners love it too and bring us some of their giant produce as a thank you."

Leaving manure to rot for as long as possible



(two years ideally) before spreading it onto grazing land helps prevent re-infection by parasites. Local farmers may take large amounts away and spread it on their own land, and for smaller amounts, mushroom growers may remove it although they prefer fresh straw manure to shavings.

South East-based MSD Grab Hire is a muck heap removal company which uses a grab lorry to remove muck heaps, requiring good access to the heap.

"We need to get alongside the heap to remove it," says Matt from MSD Grab Hire. "It's not ideal if people put heaps in the middle of a field because the vehicle weighs 16 tonnes empty so it sinks in mud easily."

Matt charges £300 to remove a muck heap.

"We have operator's licenses and need to abide by regulations which mean our overheads are more than a farmer who might be cheaper," he says. "The other difference is that a farmer can take 12 tonnes whereas we can take 16 tonnes and we can load in 20 mins whereas they'll take half a day."

"We take it to a composting facility, but this means we only deal with straw and sawdust. We can't remove a contaminated heap that has any rubbish. It helps if people send photos of the heap, its location and the accessibility as these are the main challenges that can stop us from completing a job."

**LEFT:** DISPOSAL OF SOILED BEDDING CAN BE MORE DIFFICULT WITH SOME PRODUCTS.

## WOOD SHAVINGS

Benefits of shavings are that they are absorbent, which means they soak up urine which combats odour and reduces the risk of ammonia damage to your horse's lungs. Their absorbency usually means you need less shavings than straw, but a bale of shavings is often double the cost of a bale of straw.

For horses with respiratory issues, opt for a product that has been highly dust-extracted such as AW Jenkinson's Natural Flake shavings.

## PAPER AND CARDBOARD

Cardboard and paper are less common options. Sold in compacted bales, they are lightweight and easy to handle, but due to its lightweight nature, this type of bedding can blow around and make a mess.

Cardboard products are made of corrugated cardboard which offer good drainage, leaving the top bedding dry. Both products are free from dust and spores but are heavy to lift when wet and not always easy to source. Ecobale is one example that is 100% recycled and is said to be easily composted and fully biodegradable, breaking down to a mulch.

## HEMP

Products such as Hemcore and Aubiose are made from the inner core of hemp. They contain no bleach or chemicals and are designed to be used in a thick deep litter bed as they are super-absorbent. Although laying new beds from scratch may be pricey due to the amount needed, they are very economical ▶

**ABOVE:** FOR HORSES WITH RESPIRATORY ISSUES, HIGHLY DUST EXTRACTED WOOD SHAVINGS SUCH AS AW JENKINSONS NATURAL FLAKE CAN BE BENEFICIAL.



to maintain and time saving as only droppings and wet patches are taken out. Deodorisers may be added to combat stable odours.

### WOOD PELLETS

Made from compacted shavings bound together, wood pellets are similar to shavings but doubly absorbent. They tend to be more expensive than shavings, but you don't need as much. Water is added to the bag which fluffs up the pellets into a dense, dry bedding.

Products on the market include Sorbeo, which is absorbent, dust-free and naturally antiseptic. The company adds to its environmental credentials by offering a bag recycling scheme.

### RUBBER MATTING

To add an element of warmth and comfort, many owners fit their horse's stable with rubber mats which reduce the need for lots of bedding. Rubber matting also provides horses with a non-slip surface and protection from concrete floors.

One downside to traditional rubber matting is that it consists of individual mats which

have gaps between them and allow urine to gather underneath. This causes ammonia to build up which can have a negative impact on horse's respiratory health. Regular removal and cleaning is required to prevent this.

There are now a number of rubber matting options available in various designs and

depths such as ComfortStall, a matting system that boasts an orthopaedic padded foam layer. The sealed top prevents urine leakage and is made from two layers of tough, tightly woven polyester/nylon mesh, sandwiched between three layers of dense, vulcanised latex-free rubber to offer a structurally stable, durable and impermeable, waterproof surface. ■



**ABOVE:** RUBBER MATTING REDUCES THE AMOUNT OF BEDDING NEEDED AND PRODUCTS SUCH AS COMFORTSTALL OFFER A CUSHIONED, STRUCTURALLY STABLE SURFACE.

**INSET:** SORBEO ADDS TO ITS ENVIRONMENTAL CREDENTIALS BY OFFERING A BAG RECYCLING SERVICE.

**LEFT:** STRAW PELLETS SUCH AS SUN-E-BED ARE EASIER TO STORE AND HANDLE THAN TRADITIONAL BALED STRAW, AND BEING DUST EXTRACTED, SUIT HORSES WITH RESPIRATORY ISSUES.