

The Lowdown on Pine Pellets

Changing what you thought you knew about Horse Bedding.

By April Hall

Shavings have long been the most popular material for horse bedding. However, the industry is beginning to see a movement towards new materials that make our jobs easier and more cost effective. When exploring bedding options, take into consideration overall product cost, storage, bedding installation and mucking time, as well as disposal and handling of manure.

Pine pellets have been around for quite some time, but it is not until recently that they have begun to draw some serious attention. They are made from tightly compressed, recycled pine sawdust that forms small pellets packing a powerful punch. The pellets absorb four times their weight in liquid and naturally neutralize the ammonia odor in urine. Their ability to quickly and effectively absorb moisture makes pine pellets the perfect horse bedding: They have numerous health benefits, makes stall cleaning much easier, and since you use less of the product, you will be saving money.

Time to Stop 'Mucking' Around

Depending on your number of stalls, their size and the personal hygiene habits of your horse, the amount of time it takes to muck stalls can vary. It is probably one of the least glamorous aspects of owning a horse but one of the most important. A damp, dirty stall can affect the health of your horse, leading to respiratory complications, hoof thrush and/or infections. In addition, it attracts flies and can result in serious odor problems in your barn. To prevent this, you are forced to shovel out heavy soiled bedding and manure almost every day when using shavings. Furthermore, most shavings users must strip their horses' stalls completely at least once a week.

Today, makers of pine pellets, such as Nature's Earth Product's Equine Pine, are drastically changing the way horse-owners think about this dreaded chore. You will still want to pitch out solid waste and wet bedding every day; however, with pine pellets, less of the bedding sticks to the manure. Therefore, there will be less to scoop and dispose of. You can expect to add one bag of pellets every 5 to 7 days, and you'll only need to strip the stall completely every 3 to 4 months. Most users report that their stall cleaning time gets cut in half after switching to pellets.

Waste Less & Save Green

Manure management is a concern for many horse-owners, and it is a chore that deserves careful attention. If not properly disposed of, horse waste can lead to serious environmental pollution problems, horrible odors and flies. A complete manure management system involves collection, storage and disposal or recycling of manure. Many areas around the country are having difficulties with the disposal of horse waste, and many cities are imposing firm restrictions on manure handling. Stock piles of manure near water sources are a thing of the past. As environmental restrictions tighten, horse-owners and stable managers will need to be looking for more effective and environmentally friendly ways to manage manure.

Unfortunately, manure management can be difficult and costly. It is estimated that an 1,000-pound horse generates 50 pounds of manure per day, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, with traditional horse bedding, the waste is multiplied. Manure makes up only 25 percent of total waste volume; shavings make up the majority. With the use of pine pellets, the volume of wood to manure is reduced 60 to 70 percent. The use of pine pellets greatly reduces the amount of horse waste you will be removing from your stalls.

Make Manure Work for You

With pine pellets, not only will you be reducing the amount of waste produced, you can be turning manure into money. Manure removal can be quite expensive and composting is often an excellent alternative. Since pine pellets break down much easier than shavings, composting is a viable solution for anyone, no matter how many or how few horses you have. Composting converts manure and other waste into nutrient-rich, time-release fertilizer that is great for the land, plants and the disposal of waste. It is a far better fertilizer than raw manure because, with manure, nutrients escape quickly and pollute wetlands and water sources. Pine pellets are making composting easier and more effective. For one, they decompose at a much faster rate than pine shavings, since less wood is being shoveled out with the manure, allowing more of the wood surface area to be exposed to microbial activity. Secondly, the wood pellets are high in nitrogen, and the carbon: nitrogen ratio is much closer to the ideal conditions needed to yield high-quality topsoil. The compost generated from pine pellet bedding is rich in nutrients, and the overall process is faster and takes far less work. Before you know it, local nurseries and gardeners will be standing in line to buy your nutrient-rich compost. You will be able to pay for the pine pellets with money left over.

Crunching the Numbers

Initially, you can expect to pay a bit more for pine pellets. However over time, pellets dramatically reduce your bedding costs. A bag of pellets costs a bit more than shavings, but keep in mind you will only be adding one bag of pellets to your stall per week. With shavings, most people go through anywhere from 3 to 5 bags per week.

“We originally switched over to pine pellets because of the inconsistency in the supply of shavings,” said Lee Reynolds of Montgomery, Alabama. “I had been using shavings in horse stalls for over 50 years. Once I found out how much pine pellets significantly reduced my product and labor cost, I never went back.”

Health Benefits

Pine pellets have significant health benefits. For instance, for horses that require deep bedding, they are the perfect solution. Horses often get hot spots with deep straw or shavings, but users find that when they convert to pine pellets, the sores immediately go away. Pine pellets fluff up when they get wet, so you will notice throughout the first week that the pellets will continue to expand and usually get 3 to 4 times deeper.

“Since we are a podiatry clinic, many of the horses we see spend a lot of time lying down,” said Elisa Estes of the Equine Podiatry Clinic in Lexington Kentucky, where they have been using pine pellets for over a year. “The pine pellets keep the horses from getting sores. We recommend pine pellets to all of our customers.”

To protect against respiratory problems, any stall bedding used should be free of mold or bacteria. Straw is easily susceptible to molding, and this can lead to serious health issues. Pine pellets, on the other hand, are 100 percent kiln dried; they are not only mold and bacteria free but they don't contain any unhealthy hydrocarbons like many unprocessed shavings. “We have really noticed a difference in the dust levels with pelleted pine,” said Estes. “Since many of the horses in the clinic are lying down, they are really close to the bedding. This leads to allergies and breathing problems if the bedding is too dusty.”

Getting Started

Making the switch to pine pellets is fairly easy. First you will want to thoroughly clean your stall down to the floor. Next, spread approximately 5 to 8, 40-pound bags out in the stall; the pellets should be roughly 1 inch deep. Not many pellets are needed because of their highly absorbent capabilities. Lastly, moisten the pellets with about 2 to 3 gallons of water in

order to fluff them up a bit and soften the texture. The amount of water needed will vary on the time of year and humidity in your area. Once again, you will notice throughout the first week that the pellets will continue to expand. If at any time the product begins to get at all dusty, it is crying for water; it should be kept just slightly moist. You will need to remove any wet spots and add one bag of pellets every 5 to 7 days. By following this simple plan, you can quickly be reaping the benefits of switching to pine pellets.

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