

Is shade and shelter essential for horses?



Horses spend a significant amount of their time utilizing shade and shelter because it is very important to them, yet horses are often kept in paddocks with neither. A domestic horse needs constant access to shade and shelter. A free living (wild or feral horse) can seek these out when



necessary but a domestic horse can only make the best of what is provided for them by their owner, therefore it is very important that you provide these essential facilities for any horses in your care.

In hot climates (such as the whole of Australia) horses should *always* be able to get out of the sun. In fact in Australia shade from the sun is even more important than shelter from bad weather. Horses that do not have access to shade will become stressed if they are not able to find shade.

There are several reasons why shade is especially important for horses:-

- Horses that do not have access to shade can suffer from overheating (the large body of a horse takes longer to cool down than that of a smaller bodied animal).
- Horses with areas of white (pink) skin burn easily in the sun (white facial markings and leg markings etc.).
- Horse flies prefer full sun therefore a horse without shade is also plagued by flies.
- The high fibre diet of a horse gives off lots of heat while being digested. This is handy in cold weather but works against a horse in hot weather.
- They eyes of horses have evolved to let in lots of light (so that they can make best use of any available light at dawn and dusk). In very bright weather (especially if the horse does not an adequate forelock) the horse can be uncomfortable due to this. Many breeds of horses that are common in Australia do not have an abundant forelock. Also some breeds such as Clydesdales and Appaloosas are more susceptible to eye cancers due to having more 'white' around the eye.

Horse rugs (such as cotton or cotton/mesh) should *not* be used as a substitute for shade. A horse needs to be able to get out of the sun to a cooler area. In inclement weather rugs can help to keep the horse warmer and drier but a healthy horse is usually fine with shelter only.

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Domestic horses also require shelter to be provided for them in inclement weather because again they can only utilise what is provided for them - rather than go and find what they need. A healthy horse can cope with low temperatures without any problem but it is when it is raining that a horse will usually seek out shelter. Some breeds have been bred to have a fine skin and coat (such as Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds) which means that they tend to feel the wet and cold more than tougher, hardier breeds of horses (although there are exceptions therefore treat each horse individually). Even horses with thick winter coats need somewhere to escape from strong wind and rain.



Vegetation in paddocks is a natural form of shelter and has the added benefit of providing habitat for wildlife - some of which perform very useful functions such as eating flying insects by the hundreds! This vegetation needs protection from horses (at least until it is mature) otherwise horses will eat or trample it. Man made shelters in paddocks must be large enough for the entire herd to get into without danger of less dominant members of the herd getting trapped. Consider building one very large shade/shelter (rather than a small one in each paddock) that all of the horses can get to on a daily basis. This can be situated in an area that is linked by laneways to the various paddocks and means the shade/shelter can be used all year round. Paddocks can then be rested and rotated which is all part of good land management (see our publications ***Stables, yards and shelters*** (2011) and ***Horse pasture management*** (2011)).

Stables tend to be too hot for the use of shade in hot weather (due to the enclosed sides) and should have a shaded yard attached so that the horse can get outside. Shelters can take various forms from a simple roof with no sides, which gives some



protection against the elements but most importantly provides shade without being too enclosed (a 'bus stop' shelter), to a roof with one, two or three sides (four would make it a stable), to a wall with no roof (a windbreak commonly seen in temperate climates).

In many cases a combination of a man made shelter (such as a large roof with no sides), with trees/bushes positioned to reduce wind speed works best. The vegetation can be planted so that it acts as a

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windbreak but allows cool breezes to pass through in summer. If you plant vegetation for this purpose you can use shade cloth on the sides of the building as a temporary 'windbreak' and for shade until the vegetation has matured sufficiently.

If horses are kept in individual paddocks with shelters then the shelters should be positioned so that horses can see and preferably touch each other while using them. Otherwise the horses will tend to ignore the shade/shelter because the need to be near other horses often overrides the need to seek shade/shelter. In this situation it is preferable to create a shelter that covers part of several yards/paddocks. That way horses can stand together and receive the benefits of the shelter. In this situation it is very important to have safe fencing between each yard to minimise the risk of fence injuries cause by horses interacting over a fence.



Horses will only utilise shade and shelter properly if it is positioned correctly. They need to be able to see and preferably touch another horse.

Some tips for shade/shelters

- Locate shelters on firm footing where possible - i.e. avoid slopes, clay or sand or low lying areas that get wet.
- Build shelters with a non-erodable surface (e.g. concrete, compacted quarry rubble, or commercial horse rubber flooring on a base), and fit gutters to control rain and stormwater.
- If dust or mud is an issue, surface high traffic areas around shade and shelter with dolomite or alternative material, such as quarry rubble, to stabilise the soil.
- Consider shelters which are movable, so if you are unsure if the location you have first selected will be the best, the shelter can be moved.
- In the case of individual shelters feed the horse in the shelter to keep feed dry and to encourage maximum impact (time spent by the horse in one spot) to be concentrated on a durable surface. With groups of horses hay can be fed in a shade/shelter but it must be large enough for horses to be able to safely get out of each others way. Never feed concentrates to a group of horses in a confined area as concentrate feeding increases competition.

Horses that live in areas with fruit bats (in Australia) should always be fed and watered under cover. Horses should not be fed or watered under trees that have fruit bats roosting in them (see www.qldhorsecouncil.com for information about the Hendra virus that affects fruit bats, horses and also people).

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