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Best Bedding: Woody Pet By A Nose

Several innovative beddings offer clear advantages over traditional choices—saving you money in the process.

For years, the only serious challenger to straw's position as the premier equine bedding was from shavings/sawdust. However, an increased interest in wood as an alternative fuel and the ups-and-downs of the lumber industry overall have combined to threaten the shavings supply as horse bedding. It's also resulted in higher prices. Not fun.

Money aside, your bedding selection is likely made by a combination of traditional views, regional availability and even some anthropomorphic considerations. Most people want their horse to have a deep, soft bed even though horses on turnout seem perfectly happy to plop down wherever they may be without paying much attention to how soft the surface is. Cushioning is an important consideration, though, especially for a horse with foot/leg problems, or an ill animal that will spend a lot of time lying down.

AWF Premium & Dry Den

And, even though we know better, most of us tend not to think much about a bedding's potential for respiratory irritation and allergy, how clean the horse's coat stays, labor involved in maintaining the stall and waste. A big reason for the lack of attention to these details has been limited options. No more.

If you can get past the idea that your current traditional favorite might not actually be the best choice, you may find some exciting options. We know your first reaction is likely to be skepticism. Ours was, too, but once we got down to business and gave these products a try we were pleasantly surprised.

How We Did It

Our field-test mare was a decent “housekeeper,” with a known tendency toward a runny nose and/or cough if the bedding was dusty or contained allergenic respiratory irritants. We felt our test horse was an excellent barometer of respiratory irritant potential, related either to dust level or ammonia.

The stall floor surface was concrete. The stall was stripped completely and allowed to dry between products. No additional disinfectants, lime or other urine/odor-absorbing products were used. Products were tested until the stall needed to be stripped and rebedded, or four weeks, whichever came first.

Traditional Beddings

We compared the performance of straw, generic shavings from a local mill, and straw over a base of generic sawdust, also from a local mill.

Sawdust: We didn't use the sawdust alone as it was too dusty to be used for horses because of the respiratory irritant potential. We found sawdust worked its way into coats, manes and tails, making spit-polish grooming a Herculean task. Instead, we used the sawdust as a base under our straw bedding.

Straw: Even the brightest of our local straw had a noticeable amount of dust when bales were opened and shaken out. Straw alone had the worst absorbency and odor control in our test stall, but we found a combination of 1.5 to two inches of a sawdust base with straw on top kept the straw much drier, concentrating urine in the sawdust below. It also cut cleaning time about in half and resulted in less waste of good bedding. This combo also gave a better/softer cushion than the shavings or straw alone. Waste was definitely highest for the straw alone, as much good bedding was lost with the bad.

Shavings: Shavings were the “cleanest” traditional bedding in terms of dust. Shavings did better than straw alone in odor control and absorbency but not as good as our sawdust-straw combination. For the cleanest coats, manes and tails, we'd choose shavings, although they do get into the mane and tail. Although mucking results in less waste than straw, there's still more good stuff thrown out than we'd like. Shavings are light and have a tendency to stick together, sitting on top of the tines of the shavings/sawdust fork rather than falling through.

Nontraditional Beddings

Brand-name products are a new twist to the bedding game, so we eagerly field-tested several.

American Wood Fibers Premium Bedding: Made of pine, these are the “fines” from wood-shaving production. Kiln-dried and processed for dust extraction, the particle size is somewhat larger than in unprocessed sawdust, which is more sand-like. However, the bedding has virtually no dust. It smells clean with a distinctive odor, almost faintly like chlorine. We found no evidence of respiratory irritation in our test horse, but the material did stick to the coat. The bags are a convenient size and weight for easy handling. The material sifts well through the fork and is heavier than regular shavings. We appreciated that the wet spots were obvious on the top layer. We mixed and fluffed these rather than removing them the first day, but after eight hours of exposure to air, there was still no drying out. Some fly repellent properties were noted with this bedding.

Dry Den Bear Mountain Forest Products: This product is made of compressed Northwest species wood pellets (shavings and sawdust) with added zeolites, a mineral, for ammonia control. Although it somewhat resembles Woody Pet, Dry Den is darker and more dense. It has some long cylindrical pellets but is mostly the round pellets. We found Dry Den essentially dust-free—one small “puff” when you dump the bag, then it quickly disappears.

Dry Nest Pine & Dry Nest Juniper

The manufacturer reports four bags absorb up to 50 gallons of liquid, but we didn't try to duplicate that. These pellets are heavier than shavings or sawdust, and sift through the fork with great ease, virtually eliminating waste. The wet spots are mixed into the surrounding bedding, until they become dark red. At this point, they are clearly decomposing and releasing ammonia and need to be removed. While we found this product's performance essentially the same as Woody Pet's, we did use a bit more of it for maintenance despite the larger bags. Dry Den didn't seem to mix as well and “share” moisture with the drier bedding as with other beddings, and we found no obvious advantage in odor control from the added zeolite.

Dry Nest Pine Shavings: This product has a light pine scent and is extremely clean, with big flakes/curls rather than a dust. It obviously “fluffs up” to about a 50 to 75% greater volume over the first few days, probably absorbing ambient moisture from air. It holds urine to a confined

area better than regular shavings. Dry Nest feels sponge-like under foot and provides more cushion than regular shavings. This bedding also fluffs up around piles of manure, seeming to pull moisture from them as well. Dry Nest tends to clump up on the manure fork to an extent, which we found made it a bit more of a job to get the clean material to sift through. By day five, we started to note a buildup of urine-soaked bedding in the deepest layers, but the top layers stayed dry. We found you can actually “recycle” this bedding to some extent, as it dries on exposure to air and releases the strong ammonia odor. Complete stripping was necessary at day eight.

Dry Nest Juniper Shavings: The juniper bedding has a pungent aroma, similar to cedar. However, we saw no signs whatsoever of respiratory or skin irritation. It performed similarly to the Dry Nest pine shavings during the test period.

Hunt Club Bedding: This product is made of ¼-inch squares of corrugated kraft—the same material used to make heavy cardboard boxes—with some shreds. The tiny tiles are brown/gray and coated with zeolite. The Hunt Club bedding forms a wonderfully, springy cushion because of air trapped in the corrugation. Our horse’s coat stayed clean with no dust or adherent bedding, and we saw no signs of respiratory irritation. A low-odor bedding, the top layer stays dry while the urine is underneath. Wet bedding can be recycled by bringing it to the upper layers. It dries quickly. Because it doesn’t sift easily, there’s some waste, but we found it lasts a long time if you rotate wet bedding to the top and sides, mixing it with the dry. We were concerned at first the horse might be tempted to nibble on this bedding, but that didn’t happen. We also placed a test pile with three other horses—they ignored it, too.

Woody Pet Horse And Farm Stall Bedding: This bedding is a compressed wood (pine) product, with the tar and pitch removed. It looks like kibble-sized nuggets/pellets—slightly crunchy under foot at first, like gravel—but it changes to more wood/sawdust-like as it absorbs moisture. It’s an off white/tan color. We found it had almost no dust and doesn’t crush under foot. It gave a rapid, excellent absorption of urine, turning to a pale yellow color.

Hunt Club & Woody Pet

We noted no odor when it was moved around and mixed with the dry bedding, however, it does disintegrate somewhat when wet. The bedding falls through the sawdust fork tines with ease, much easier than dry sawdust or shavings. Cleaning for the first week involved nothing more than picking out manure and mixing the remaining bedding together. It took only a few minutes—actually it took a week to get one wheelbarrow full of manure because so little bedding is wasted. We also found the horse's coat stays cleaner.

Koetter And Smith Sawdust: This is a fine sawdust, from poplar and oak, kiln-dried down to 6% moisture level. It has the consistency of brown sugar, with a reddish brown color. Although we're told additional processing is used to remove fine dust, we found this product dusty.

Our test horse had some increased nasal discharge but no actual coughing. This product is extremely absorbent. Urine does not spread out. It stays in a small "spot," and it's easy to pick out wet spots only—like cleaning a kitty-litter box. The floor was dry beneath, and the product lasts a long time—we added only one bag per week. This might be a terrific choice for run-in sheds where the dust would be less of a problem than in a stall.

Bottom Line

It was a close decision between Woody Pet and Hunt Club Bedding. They performed extremely well, and we were quickly won over, despite our initial skepticism about these new-fangled bedding alternatives.

The low-to-nil respiratory irritation and clean coats were a big plus for both. Odor control was also excellent with both, and Woody Pet performed as well in this department as Dry Den, the other wood-pellet bedding in our test, which has added zeolite and costs more.

Hunt Club Bedding offered the best bedding cushion in the trial, but the nod overall has to go to Woody Pet for its slightly lower overall cost, its minimal waste, and the fact that we found you can clean a Woody-Pet-bedded stall in record time.