Spring Grooming for Warmer Weather

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Spring brings excitement to any barn. The start of the summer show circuit is just around the corner. Wilderness trails will soon be dry and ready to ride. Horses and foals curious about the budding vegetation have renewed your own sense of wonder towards nature. But spring also ushers in a mess no horse owner relishes: The shedding of your horse's winter coat. However, there are simple ways to help transform your horse from a hairy behemoth into a sleek beauty.

The importance of spring grooming

Horses are clipped, bathed, brushed, and combed for more than just looks. In fact, your horse's health depends on a rigorous, year-round grooming regimen. Grooming removes dirt and mud, where bacteria, insects, and pathogens can hide. It helps increase circulation and distribute natural skin oils. It also allows you to spot injuries, insect bites, and external parasites you otherwise might have missed.

Good grooming is especially important in the spring. Most horses develop a long, shaggy winter hair coat to protect against cold temperatures and constant winter precipitation. Once the weather warms, however, longer coats can be dangerous for work, field, show, and pleasure horses. In fact, horses across the country succumb to heat exhaustion every spring. Longer hair causes your horse to heat up faster during exercise or work and take longer to cool down. In addition, long hair also hinders the drying process, which may promote bacteria growth and skin infections during the wet spring weather.

Three ways to help horses shed winter coats

It is easy to help your horse loosen and lose his winter hair coat. In fact, there are numerous methods and grooming products designed to aid the natural shedding process. The method and tools you use depend on your horse's attitude towards grooming, as well as your personal preference. Basically, spring grooming can be broken into three categories:

- **the natural approach** - many horse owners choose to do nothing about their horse's shedding process. Eventually, your horse will naturally lose his longer, winter hair coat. However, natural shedding can be a long process. Shedding is tied to photoperiod, or the length of sunlight in a day. Therefore, in some parts of the country the natural shedding process could take months. During this time, active horses could overheat. In addition, horses who sweat excessively to cool down may lose important electrolytes, vitamins, and minerals.
- **the traditional approach** - the most cost-effective way to assist shedding is with select grooming tools and a lot of elbow grease. Use a curry comb to loosen dead hair. Once a section of your horse's coat is loose, use a body brush to remove the loosened hair. A shedding blade can also help remove longer hair along the back and flanks. Repeated full body grooming sessions over a few weeks will completely remove your horse's winter coat. Since this method requires vigorous brushing, however, care needs to be taken with thin-skinned breeds and around sensitive areas of your horse's body. Also, monitor your horse's electrolyte levels and, if necessary, use an electrolyte supplement until his winter hair coat is fully removed.

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- **the high-tech approach** - the fastest way to remove your horse's winter coat is with full-body clippers and precision trimmers. In just a few hours, the bulk of your horse's winter coat can be removed. Then a regular bath, brush, and comb grooming routine will keep your horse beautiful and ready for activity throughout the summer. During the start of spring, however, blanket any freshly clipped horse when the night temperatures plummet.

There is a spring grooming method to suit any horse, personal preference, and budget. Regardless of the method you choose, however, ensure your horse is safe at all times during the grooming process. A quality halter and lead or quick-release cross tie helps maintain control of your horse and keeps him - and you - safe while you groom. In addition, remember that one of the most important ways you can influence your horse's coat health is with proper nutrition. Protein, vitamins, and minerals all contribute to healthy hair coats and help keep your horse beautiful and in top condition no matter the season.

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