

Taking Care of Your Dream Barn

By Tracy D. Dowson

Four years after building my dream barn, it's time to refurbish some things. Anyone who has a barn knows that there is always going to be work to be done with regular maintenance, however after a few years of wear and tear, I'm looking at the project as a whole and reporting back to you on what has worked well and what could have done better. Shortly after the barn was built, I wrote a column about the experience and received more calls on that column than any other. It seems that many people are looking for a better way to house their horses. We currently have a five stall barn, facing south, with a concrete alleyway, a wash rack, garage/workshop, hay loft, tack room and grain room. Back in 2000, this barn won an award for design and construction. This barn has held up to a 50-year flood, wind up to 60 miles an hour, and roughly five feet of snow. I think the engineering is fine. The four-year maintenance punch-list is as follows:

We put in a French drain system on the south side of the barn. This worked well for many years, however the fabric used started to pull-up around the ends and ripped. This was a thick, garden fabric by a company that is no longer in business. So, I bought a roll of landscape fabric and had it installed differently. First we used as many layers as we had fabric to cover the area. This was nailed to the base of the barn and a treated wood frame. The landscape fabric is still not as tough as needed for this high traffic area and in another few years I hope to find a stronger fabric. The frame and the fabric was laid over the existing rock covered pipe and sand was used to cover the entire area. If I could find a heavier material, I would use it. Horse hooves, with just keg shoes, walking in and out of the barn cause a lot of wear and tear.



After working on the French drain, I wanted to keep the horses from kicking the shavings out of their stalls onto the sand. I cut a 4" x 2" board the exact width of the door and with screws attached some rubber matting so that it would stick up a few inches. The horses don't kick this 2" x 4" out of the way because it fits tight right up to where the door frame sticks out. I would like to try the type of brush found on the inexpensive snow scrappers instead of the rubber sometime.

The interior walls of each stall are done in white plastic coated board. I know this really shows the dirt, but I really wanted to know where the dirt is. I wash the wall about once a year with Tek-trol. (Tek-Trol is made by Bio-Tek Industries, Inc. at 404-799-2050.) It should be safe, it's the same disinfecting wash used in dairy barns. I also wash down the foaling stalls before laying straw.

Because I did not want to heat the entire barn, I opted for the radiant heaters. I have two stalls with heaters and one directly over the groom area. If I choose to wash a horse in weather that is less than ideal, I just have to make sure the hot water heater is on, use the radiant heater and blow dry the horse with the vacuum. I mentioned the water heater, which is kept in a small room under the stairs. We added extra insulation in this room. The door to this room also has a lock so that I can store my show bridles in there and feel that they are safe.

We were unable to put plumbing for a toilet in because our barn is across (almost below) our septic system. I was able to purchase an electric flush port-a-potty from a nearby camping store. The port-a-potty usually stays in the lock-away room with the water heater and a built-in medicine cabinet. This little gem also travels with me in the dressing room of the three horse trailer.

I was told that it would not be a good idea to put tile flooring in the tack room because the floors would get cold and the glue wouldn't hold. So my son and I laid masking tape across the floor to make tiles with paint. In some of the squares I spray painted the horse stencils I bought at a tack store. All of my western saddles are on rolling saddle racks. It's easy to move them out to clean the saddle or sweep the floor. During foaling season I have been known to sleep in this tack room.

One of the best additions we have made to this barn is the plastic sheeting over the doors from the stalls to the runs. It keeps the barn cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. If it's windy, it keeps the shavings from blowing into the alleyway and if it gets really windy, I close the barn doors because I don't want my plastic sheeting to get damaged. Our barn cats keep the mice population down completely. My son and his cousin picked out two matching black and white kittens from the pound (Boris and Natasha), before we brought the horses home. We were able to keep all of the doors closed for a few weeks allowing the kittens to get use to their new home. Years later, Natasha got inside of the horseshoer's truck and went to his next appointment, without anyone knowing she had hitch-hiked. To make a long story short - a year and a half later we were able to get Natasha returned because she had been micro chipped.

The metal barn has held-up very well. We put insulation on the inside of the doors to cut down on the wind noise. We had a feral cat or other small animal get caught in the barn and tried to chew through the insulation, thus we had to get spray foam for this repair.

We poured cement in the alleyway and had to put in rubber mats in the groom area. We later covered the rest of the aisle with the mighty-light mats. These lighter weight mats were in the stalls, but were not holding-up to the daily wear and tear. Heavy mats are now in all of the stalls and the sections of mighty-light mats can be taken to shows and placed in the stalls or groom areas.

Fortunately, we have not had to do a lot of upkeep. If we had to start with just the property, I think we would have the barn build first and have an apartment built into it. That way we could be there when our house was being built and later have a place for help to stay.