

Proper Care of Your Saddle and Leather Accessories

By Sabine K. Schleese, B.Sc., MBA

Taking proper care of your leather goods greatly enhances their appearance and lifespan, no matter the brand. Nowadays, saddles are considered investments, with proper "tune ups" extending lifespans to 15-20 years (for a good quality, adjustable saddle that fits the rider and can be re-fitted to the horse as necessary).

Maintenance includes repairing stitches, replacing billets, and addressing fit issues. One of the greatest misconceptions has been about saddle soaps. Saddle soaps are exactly what their names imply: soaps, and should be used for cleansing only. Soap and sweat are the two enemies of leather if not removed. Saddle soap rids accumulated sweat and grime which, if left on, will result in the leather becoming brittle and cracking. A clean saddle doesn't irritate your horse's hide. But it is wrong to leave the soap on the saddle after cleaning.

Soaps containing built-in moisturizers are beneficial only because they remove fewer natural lubricants of the leather during washing. But think - after you wash your hair, you rinse out the shampoo; after you wash your hands, you rinse off the soap. Then either a conditioner or a hand



lotion is applied to return some of the moisture that the soap has removed. Soap eats the tan. Today's leathers get destroyed by unremoved soap faster because of more chemicals.

Leather is skin which has been treated (tanned). Skin is made of 70-80% water. After the skin has been tanned into leather, it retains about 25% moisture. Nowadays the tanning process takes only about six weeks. Every time you clean your saddle, the soap (even those with glycerine) should be rinsed off and moisturizer applied. Leather is no longer a living system and cannot replenish its moisture content itself.

Use a leather cream without any clean-

ing ingredients on all leather items you have. Leather oil can be used once if you wish to darken the original colour. It should only be used thereafter, and only on the saddle panel, as a lubricant, since the

wool will soak up any excess. On the seat it will soak through and into the laminated and glued layers of the tree, possibly resulting in eventual tree breakage. Oil should not be used anywhere the leather comes into contact with your person (e.g., breeches, gloves) as

it discolours these materials. Oil on the flaps can soften the leather and make them too flexible. Use products that are meant for leather. Olive oil for salads, baby oil for babies!

Saddles and tack should be cleaned after every use, or at least given a quick wipe over. Clean thoroughly once a week. If you store your saddle or tack over a longer period of time, keep it at room temperature, but never cooler than 5°C, with 30-40% humidity to retain leather suppleness. Mildew indicates that the leather is still alive with enough moisture content to attract mildew! Give it a good wash and apply leather moisturizer to restore the original looks.

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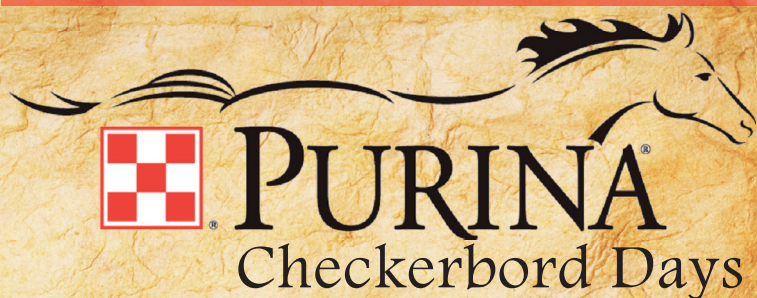
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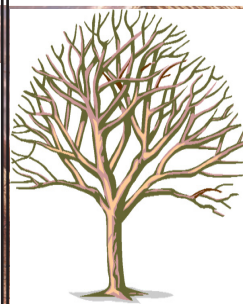
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