

Arriving Soon?
By Vicki Schmidt

As if some of us don't already have enough stress in our lives, we decide to breed our mares. All goes well, the mare is confirmed in foal and you sit back thinking the world is a dandy place. A thoughtful friend even gives you the book "Blessed are the Broodmares". You sit down on a stormy wintry afternoon to enjoy the book, with a hot cup of coffee and a nice batch of ginger snaps to accompany the cozy afternoon of reading.

All of a sudden your peaceful afternoon is thrown into turmoil. Not because the storm blew the roof off or anything like that. But because the newest word in your equine vocabulary: "malpositioning" is followed by no less than 20 pages of the possible complications your mare could encounter. Not only that, but the following chapter has words like septicemia, pneumonia and barker foal syndrome.

If I'd read much about breeding and foaling before my mare conceived there's a good chance I wouldn't have gone the breeding route. It wasn't part of my business plan but a "diamond in the rough" mare ended up being of superb quality, and one that had much to offer the limited gene pool of a recently endangered breed. So, by default, I'm in the breeding business and with the Gods of Good Horses willing, my fifth year of foals will soon be upon us.

I did a lot of reading after my first sight of a heartbeat on the ultrasound and I've learned another book full from experience, and good or bad, I'm sure I've got a lot more to learn. If you're hoping to be blessed with your first foal this spring the following information is designed especially for you. Do not skimp on anything, and be prepared for everything. 99% of foalings go perfectly well, and a good number of those foals will survive just fine. But with the slim chance that something does go wrong, or for some reason foaling conditions aren't ideal, knowing what to expect and what to do will lessen the anxiety and increase your foal's chance of a successful life.

First and foremost, know the mares **last** breeding date. We once had a mare arrive for a June foaling as the owners had seen her covered in early July the previous year. The mare was quite large, and she had been pastured "up till Halloween" with the stallion for the previous summer. A long story later, the foal arrived September 9th.

Knowing the mares last breeding date puts you in the ballpark for foaling. There are a million tales about maiden mares always going early, mares that foal 4 days late most always foal 4 days late, etc. Trust me, the minute the mare is aware anyone thinks they know her plans, she will change them. (It's a mare thing!) At least two weeks before the "scheduled" foaling date make sure you have *washed* straw on hand, a foaling kit together, and your mare's foaling stall or paddock area ready for her comfort. The sooner you have your foaling items prepared, the later the mare will foal. Of course, not having a thing ready is a sure way to make sure the foal comes early. There again, it's a mare thing!

Though many owners use only sawdust, I'm a firm believer in allowing the mare and foal a deep bed of washed straw for at least a week. Shavings are not advised as large light shavings can be easily inhaled with the foals first breaths causing suffocation or other

breathing complications. Mats and other floorings can be very slippery for foals. We bed our matted stalls with 6" of sawdust and then a heavy layer of fluffed straw. Not only is this warm and cozy for the foals, it also provides good traction for little hooves, and a soft cushion for both mare and foal.

Any good book on breeding and most every equine site on the internet will lead you to a great list of items for your foaling kit. Your veterinarian and friends who have lived through a foaling can also well advise you of what items to have on hand. Along with your choice of naval antiseptic don't forget a soft tipped enema. Having one quickly available is invaluable in the event your foal fails to pass the meconium (it's first poop!) in a comfortable amount of time.

After the foal is up and nursing, usually within the first hour or two, I begin to relax, just a little. After a week with a new foal I can almost sleep through the night again. But with foal heat right around the corner, another few days where extra attention is paramount is upon us. The vast majority of foals develop diarrhea during their dam's foal heat, usually 8-12 days after foaling. With thoughtful management to this point, additional monitoring of the foals alertness through this stage is well worth the effort. Always remember, foals can weaken quickly with diarrhea, especially if combined with too much sun or warm temperatures. Dehydration and electrolyte imbalances can easily develop, and severe weakness soon follows. Many foals will not nurse heartily during the foal heat, due to a slight off-flavor to the milk, and may turn to drinking water to lessen their thirst. Both these actions further compromise their strength. Not allowing water within the reach of the foal less than 6 weeks old is always a good idea, and any decline in your foal's alertness is cause for immediate concern. Discuss with your veterinarian complimentary care for your foal during the foal heat. Many will recommend having a few pints of pedylite or other electrolyte substance on hand. I have personally seen very lethargic and weak, "Raggedy Ann foals" running around after just a few hours of electrolyte supplementation.

If you're like equine owners in New England, your veterinarian's busiest time of the year is during the breeding season. Foal emergencies and questions may take hours to be answered, even in the best of circumstances. Having supplies on hand and, along with your veterinarian's recommendation, the knowledge to use them will give your foal an extra measure of care and continued vitality.

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The farm shows and stands the Shire stallion, Sassy Supreme Prince William.
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