

A HORSE WITH “FEATHERS”?

(Caring for Feathering)

By Kim Murchison

Yes, it is true. Shires have “feather,” not “feathers” like a bird, but that beautiful long white (or black) hair that flows from the knees down to the ground is called “feathering.” This “feather” is a classic characteristic that is seen on Shire and Clydesdale horses’ legs. A breeder wants fine, silky feather on their Shire - the more, the better.

When purchasing a Shire, one must carefully inspect the “feather” on the horse. Feathered horses are susceptible to a problem called “scratches” that affects the feathered area on the animals. “Scratches” is a term that refers to a skin dermatitis problem seen in the deep layers of skin of lower legs of horses and cattle. It is caused by a fungus, specifically *Sporotrichum schenki*, which, in its most advanced form, can have a bacterial component. This fungus/bacteria thrives in moist, manure-rich environments. It is most prevalent in the pastern and fetlock areas of the horse and can be seen as thickened black, crusty scab-like bumps. Due to the location of the sores and the constant movement in the joint area, the skin will move and crack, leaving festering abscesses. Left untreated, the open sores allow the bacterial component to invade inner tissues and even vascular and lymphatic vessels. When this occurs, the whole lower leg may swell and the horse may become lame. Treatment at this point is complicated due to the combined bacterial/fungal components.

Some “older” Shires are afflicted with this swelling, lameness, and persistent problem that can lead to a very costly and oftentimes untreatable condition. Please confer with a veterinarian about treatment options if the Shire you wish to purchase has this condition.

Feathered horse owners take precautions to prevent this disease. The following recipe is for “leg oiling*” and can be applied as often as needed (we do it on a weekly basis):

2-3 lbs. sulfur powder**
16 – 32 oz. mineral oil
4 oz. Tea Tree oil (doTERRA® Melaleuca)
2 oz. Lavender oil

*Mix into a runny “Elmer’s glue consistency” and pour on the leg from the knee down and rub into the feathering, paying special attention to the back of the leg and under the pastern area, working the oil mixture down into the skin. Coat all legs completely and leave on.

**Sulfur powder can be purchased at most feed stores or garden centers as rose dust.