

Harvesting Summer Annual Grasses for Hay

Can hay from summer annual grasses be dry and high quality? No way, you say? It can't be done! Well, if these are your thoughts, read on and let's see if I can change your mind.

It is difficult to put up good quality hay - hay that is dry and will not heat or mold - from summer annual grasses like sorghum-sudan hybrids, pearl millet, and forage sorghums. Obviously, this type of hay, which is also called cane hay by some folks, is challenging to bale or stack for most growers. So let's look at what it takes to make good cane hay.

Nearly all problems making good summer grass or cane hay are caused by the stems. Stems are low in protein and energy, they are unbearably slow to dry, and the lower stems contain most of the potentially toxic nitrates.

To solve some problems, cut early, when plants are only waist high. When cut early, stems are smaller, they're eaten readily, and the hay contains more protein and energy. Also, there is less plant volume. So with smaller stems and fewer of them the hay will dry quicker.

Regardless of when you harvest though, cut it high, leaving 8 to 10 inches of stubble. Tall stubble pays off three ways - it helps plants begin regrowth quicker, it holds hay off the ground so air can help dry underneath, and it keeps many nitrates out in the field stubble rather than harvesting them all in your hay.

And finally, always crimp cane hay. Even when stems are small, the waxy coating on the stem causes slow drying. But if you break open these stems by crimping, water will be able to escape and evaporate more quickly.

So cut it early, cut it high. Crimp the stems and they will dry.

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