
Hay Is for Horses

Hay quality is important when feeding a horse, so it is important to know the proper conditions and appropriate timing for cutting and baling hay.

Hay is considered to be good quality if the horses eating that hay are performing well. The main factor affecting hay quality is maturity at harvest time. Grass hay harvested just prior to heading in the boot stage will have the highest quality. As the grass heads, blooms and sets seed, the tonnage to harvest will go up a bit and the quality will go down. After the seed is mature, both yield and quality of grass hay slide down rapidly. Fertilizing brome hay fields with 60-80 pounds of nitrogen per acre will increase both the yield and quality of the hay.

Alfalfa hay should be cut pre-bloom for the highest quality. Cutting on a 28-30 schedule after the first cutting will keep the prime quality coming. Cutting in early bloom stage is going to prove horses with good quality feed. Hay analysis shows high-quality feed and superior performance are both results of early-cut hay. Hay testing should be considered for high value animals and would certainly be a great help to nutritionists.

Hay quality is affected by curing and handling conditions. Field-cured hay is hay that is left in the field to dry after cutting. Rain can take nutrients away from plants during curing and cause leaf loss. Excessive rain can cause mold. Raking and baling dry hay during low humidity afternoons can cause extreme leaf loss. Leaf loss can be prevented by raking while the hay is about 40 percent moisture and baling when the dry hay is re-wet by late night dew or higher humidity levels. Hay baled at moisture levels about 20 percent can heat up, bind nutrients, and even start a fire which has cost people loss of feed and barns. High moisture content can also cause mold, which shows up as a white or gray color with a musty odor in the bale. Never feed moldy hay to horses. Properly stored dry hay will not get better, but is very stable is keep free of rain, moisture and rodent damage.

Many acreage owners would be wise to feed hay year around rather than grazing horses on limited acres, which will likely destroy the pasture. Horses need 4 acres per horse for summer grazing. In addition they need to have this area segmented as they can destroy forage in small areas by repeated grazing favorite areas of tender regrowth. Many times is it better to have a half acre or larger feeding and exercise lot and use other acres for hay production or short term grazing when forage is available. Horses should be removed when the grass is at or above four inches in height. For brome grass most of the production is in the May and June period. For native grasses the growth period is in July and August. One problem which is emerging is the increase of tall fescue in pastures. Tall fescue is a great lawn grass. In the pasture it will be increase and take over a pasture in a matter of years. There is a very simple reason for this. The horses will not eat it unless forced to do so. The sharp hairs on the leaves hurt the horses mouth so the grass seeds out and continues to take over for the readily eaten brome. When it gets so bad the horses are forced to eat it, they will lose weight and condition.

Paul C Hay, Extension Educator

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Gage County • 1115 West Scott Street, Beatrice NE 68310

(402) 223-1384 • FAX: (402) 223-1370 • email: phay1@unl.edu

