
Options for Green Beans

Late planted beans may not mature before frost. When this happens, though, all is not lost. There are several salvage options for these beans.

One of the better options is to use the beans as a forage. After all, when soybeans were first introduced to the United States they were used as forage. And today they still can be used effectively for grazing, hay, or silage.

Grazing usually is the simplest. Since cattle don't normally graze beans it will take a while for them to adapt to them but once they do, they will perform well on bean pasture. Soybeans have a low risk of causing bloat. However, if pods filled very much, animals could get too much fat or oil from the seeds. Consumption of more than 4 to 5 pounds of beans per day can reduce fiber digestibility and cause other digestive disturbances. To reduce this risk, provide some good, palatable grass hay in the soybean pasture to try and reduce the amount of soybeans in the diet. In addition, strip graze the soybeans by allocating a fresh strip to animals every couple of days. This will reduce selective grazing of pods by forcing animals to consume more of the whole plant and also greatly reduce trampling losses.

Soybean hay can be similar to alfalfa hay in nutritional value but it's hard to make. Stems are quite woody and dry slowly so to hasten stem drying, be sure to condition or crimp the hay. Leaves dry quickly and crumble easily when dry. This leaf-stem combination makes it difficult to dry soybean hay easily. You'd like to rake to help dry the stems on the bottom of the windrow, but if you do so you might lose many leaves as they crumble and fall away, leaving you with just bean sticks for hay.

So you have two options. You can leave the windrow alone while it dries unbearably slow, hoping that it doesn't rain before it's fit to bale. This may be your best option if weather cooperates. Or, you can rake soy hay within one day of cutting, before leaves on top have dried enough to crumble. This may be your only option if raking is necessary to put two or more windrows together for satisfactory baling.

Making good soy silage is less risky, if you have silage equipment and do it right. Start by making sure the moisture content of the chopped forage is between 60 and 70 percent. When making silage, I prefer mixing it with corn or sorghum as they are being ensiled whenever possible. A ratio of one ton soybean silage to three or four tons of corn or sorghum silage will improve fermentation of the soybean silage and increase protein content of the corn or sorghum silage by 2 or 3 points. For straight soy silage, chop when leaves first start to turn yellow. Be sure to get a good, clean chop. Uniformly add a silage inoculant designed for legumes like alfalfa. In addition, add about one bushel of rolled corn or fifty pounds of molasses to each ton of wet silage to aid fermentation. And pack soy silage especially well.

If making forage from green beans is not a good option, don't forget that bean plants that include all the beans, pods, leaves, and stems will contain about 3 percent nitrogen, or about 60 pounds of nitrogen per dry ton of bean biomass. Most fields will have between 1 and 2 tons of dry biomass so more than 60 pounds of nitrogen per acre can be made available to your next crop if you incorporate the green plants into the soil as a green manure. This also will return other minerals and organic matter back to the soil.

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