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Selecting Hay for Horses

Hay is an essential part of the horses' diet throughout the winter, when horses are stalled and when fresh pasture forage isn't available. Hay provides fiber and nutrients that are important for proper digestion and a healthy horse.

Tips for choosing hay:

- Hay should be selected based on nutrient content and physical properties (free from weeds, mold and dust).
- Nutrient content and digestibility are lower in mature "stemmy" hays
- First cutting hay is usually lower quality than later cuttings.
- Alfalfa hay is usually high in energy and nutrient content making it an excellent choice for horses in exercise, reproduction, lactation and for weight gain.
- Laboratory Hay Testing is the only way to determine the energy and nutrient content of hay and only cost \$15 to \$20 through your County Extension Office.
- Good quality grass hay will usually meet the energy and nutrient requirements for horses at maintenance and light work with the exception of copper (Cu), zinc (Zn) and Selenium (Se). Most feed companies offer a "forage balancer supplement" designed to be fed with hay or pasture.
- Hay, pasture forage and grains are low in sodium (Na) and Chloride (Cl), which is salt, so horses should be fed white salt free choice in addition to hay and grain.

How much hay should I plan to purchase for a 1,000 lb adult horse?

- Most horses should be fed 2% body weight hay per day or 20 lb per day.
- When feeding grain for work, reproduction or lactation, horses still require a minimum of 1.5% body weight hay per day or 15 lb per day.
- If pasture is available during the growing season, plan to purchase about 75 small square bales (if 50 lb each) per horse to get through the winter months.
- If pasture is limited, or not available, plan to purchase about 144 small square bales (if 50 lb each) per horse for one year.

Can large round-bales be fed to horses?

- Round-bales should only be used when stored and fed under cover, or to large groups of horses that will consume the bale within a couple of days because mold will form when exposed to wet winter weather.

Other considerations

KY 31 Tall Fescue hay should not be fed to pregnant mares, but is safe for all other types of horses.

Alfalfa should be free from blister beetles, which cause cantharidin poisoning.

The bermudagrass stem fly maggot is a new pest affecting hay crops in the southeast and effects on horses are unknown, but a forage analysis should be performed to determine nutrient content of damaged hay.