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Winter 2011

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10 Tips for Choosing the Best Hay for Your Horse

High-quality hay can be an important source of essential nutrients in your horse's diet. A horse's protein and energy requirements depend on age, stage of development, metabolism and workload. A mature horse will eat **2 to 2.5 %** of its body weight a day, and for optimum health, nutritionists recommend that at least half of this should be **roughage** such as **hay**. For a 1000-pound horse, that means at least 10 pounds of **roughage** each day.

Hay generally falls into one of two categories-grasses or legumes. Legume hay is higher in protein, energy, calcium and vitamin A than grass hays. While hay alone may not meet the total dietary requirements of young, growing horses or those used for high levels of performance, high-quality hay may supply ample nutrition for less active horses.

Once you've determined the best category of hay for your horse, most people select hay based on how it looks, smells and feels. Use the following tips from the American Association of Equine practitioners to select the best hay for your horse.

1. It's what inside that counts. Ask that one or several bales are opened so you can evaluate the hay inside the bales. Do not worry about slight discoloration on the outside, especially in stacked hay.
2. Choose hay that is as fine-stemmed, green and leafy as possible, and is soft to the touch.
3. Avoid hay that is overcured, excessively sun-bleached, or smells moldy, dusty, musty or fermented.
4. Select hay that has been harvested when plants are in early bloom for legume or before seed heads have formed in grasses.
5. Avoid hay that contains significant amounts of weeds, dirt, trash or debris.
6. Examine hay for signs of insect infestation or disease. Be careful to check for blister beetles in alfalfa. Ask the grower about any potential problems in the region.

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Hoary Alyssum in Pasture and Hay Fields in Southwest Michigan

Paw Paw, MI. Farmers and horse owners should be on the lookout for hoary alyssum, a weed species that has been found in a few hay fields in southwest Michigan which can be poisonous to horses. [University of Minnesota Researchers reported that the ingestion of hay that contains a high level of hoary alyssum can cause horses to experience depression and cause a swelling of the lower legs.](#) Fever and short term diarrhea also can accompany ingestion of the plant. Clinical signs normally subside within 2-4 days after the horses are removed from the alyssum source. In severe cases, foundering with stiffness in joints has been observed.

[Hoary alyssum is a member of the mustard family.](#) This plant is quite often confused with another plant species in the mustard family, pepperweed, because of the similarity of the shape and attachment of seeds. Hoary alyssum can exist as an annual, biennial or perennial species. The stems are erect and tend to branch near the top of the plant. Hoary Alyssum plants can grow from 1 to 3 feet tall, although they are frequently found shorter than this in southwest Michigan hay fields and pastures. Leaves are alternate, smoothed edged, and narrow with a general oblong shape. The stem, leaves and seed pods are covered in a whitish gray, short branched hair which gives the plant a pale light green coloration. The flowers are white, and appear in a raceme (small stemlike connection) at the end of the branches. The flowers have 4 deeply divided petals. The seed pods are round, somewhat flattened, and contain only a few seeds. The seeds are usually held close to the stems (unlike pepperweeds) and have a short pointed growth at the end opposite where they attach to the stem. The plants flower from early June until fall.



Hoary Alyssum is a fairly hard weed to control in the mixed species alfalfa fields that are commonly used for horse hay. Some of the herbicides that are labeled for application on established alfalfa fields (1 year or more) while the alfalfa is dormant in late fall or early spring are excellent at controlling hoary alyssum. Unfortunately, they will also likely kill any of the companion planted grass forage species in the field as well. Another spray program that is a possibility to control hoary alyssum is to apply 2,4-DB amine (Butoxone 200 or Butyrac 200 only). These herbicides are a special Butyl formulation that is the only 2,4-D that is safe to apply to alfalfa. This herbicide application should be made in early April when the hoary alyssum seedlings are in the 2- to 4-leaf stage. This control program has been rated as "Fair" in controlling hoary alyssum. Consult MSU Extension Bulletin E-434 "Weed Control Guide for Field Crops" and the product label for more information on using this or other forage herbicide products. [Also, be aware that all formulations of 2,4-D have the potential to injure grape plants in the area.](#) Portions of Van Buren, Berrien, Cass and Kalamazoo Counties have a special 2,4-D exclusion zone that bans the use of ester formulations of 2,4-D. 2,4-D amines can be applied but extreme caution should be used to keep pressures low, boom heights low and potential drift away from grapes. Producers within 1 miles of grape production should exercise extreme caution even when using the amine formulation of 2,4-D.



Making Appointments

When scheduling appointments with any of the doctors the following information would be very helpful:

- 1 Name of horse's owner
(Address and phone number if new client or the address has changed.)
- 2 Name of horse(s).
Address or location of the horse.
- 3 Issues involved such as vaccinations, lameness, illness, etc.
- 4 Contact person (if different from owner) and phone number.
Problems do arise during the day such as emergencies, extra work at a prior call, necessitating change of appointment time.
Sometimes the doctor may actually be early.
- 5 Payment is due at time of service. Cash, check, or credit card is accepted.

** We will make every effort to provide the best service and care to maintain the health and well being of your horse(s). Your help providing the above information will go a long way to accomplish this goal.

RATION EVALUATION and BALANCING

Equine-analytical Laboratories specializes in the most modern techniques for determining the nutrient content of forages and feeds for horse owners. Because forage makes up at least 50% of a horse's diet, knowing its nutritional make-up is essential for creating an optimum total program.

Art and science and combined to determine the best feeding program for your horse. The foundation of the ration should be based on science. The mission of **Equine-analytical** is to provide you with facts about your feeds to scientifically balance your ration. Once the foundation ration is established, art and experience come into play to provide your horse with a well formulated, practical diet.

For a thorough job of ration balancing, multiple nutrients and their interactions with one another should be considered. Most professionals use computer programs to evaluate all factors. To make the best use of your feed analysis results, consult with your nutritional professional (feed dealer, extension agent, or veterinarian). Their knowledge of daily nutrient requirements and feed composition will help you to develop a fundamentally sound, fact based diet for your horses.

Feed analysis results and rations can be evaluated on either an as sampled or dry matter basis. As sampled results may be used when all feeds offered are of a similar dry matter. For example, hay and grain generally average about 90% dry matter (88-92%). If they are the only feeds offered, the ration can be balanced on an as sampled basis.

Pasture, on the other hand, contains a significant amount of water and is much lower in dry matter. It can vary in dry matter (15-65%) depending upon the stage of maturity, season and geographic location. As such, rations containing feeds that are low in dry matter (i.e. high in moisture) are typically balanced on a dry matter basis. Work with a nutritional professional or veterinarian for a complete evaluation.

Equine-analytical Laboratories web site address is: www.equi-analytical.com
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7. Reject bales that seem excessively heavy for their size, feel warm to the touch, as they could contain excess moisture that could cause mold, or worse, spontaneous combustion.
8. When possible purchase and feed hay within a year of harvest to preserve its nutritional value.
9. Store hay in a dry, sheltered area out of the rain, snow and sun, or cover in the stack to protect it from the elements.
10. When buying in quantity, have hay analyzed by a certified forage laboratory to determine its actual nutrient content.

Remember that horses at different ages and stages of growth, development and activity have different dietary requirements. Call Dr. Ryker's office if you want help evaluating a balanced diet.

For more information about choosing hay, ask your equine veterinarian for the "Hay Quality and Horse Nutrition" brochure, provided by the AAEP in partnership with Educational Partners Bayer Animal Health and Purina Mills, Inc. More information about nutrition also can be found online at the AAEP's horse health Web Site, www.myHorseMatters.com

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