

Hay, is for Horses, But Which Kind?

The question of which type of hay is best is in the back of every horse owner's mind. There are several different types of hay to choose from and each type can vary greatly in quality and nutritional value. In general, there are two major classes of hay: legumes and grasses. The common legume hays in Florida include alfalfa, clover, and peanut. Grass hays are more common than legumes and these include timothy, orchard, Coastal bermuda, oat, Johnson, bahia, and rye. Making a decision about which hay to choose can often be limited by regional availability. Focusing on a few key factors regarding the best hay for your horse can simplify the decision making process. Cleanliness, nutritional value, maturity, price, and location are some of the important features that should be considered when buying hay.

Several differences exist between the two general categories of hay. Legumes tend to be higher in protein, calcium, energy, and digestible nutrients than grass hays. This does not necessarily mean that legumes are particularly better than grass hays. The amount of energy required by your horse will directly influence the amount of nutrients needed to sustain him daily. Your horse's stage of life can also affect energy requirements. For example, a growing foal has much higher nutrient demands than a retired pleasure horse. Horses used for pleasure riding versus endurance racing have greatly differing energy requirements to meet their day to day needs. Life stage and exercise should both be factored in when quantifying your horse's daily caloric requirements.

Maturity of the plant during harvesting is another key factor that impacts the nutrient value of the hay. Hay that is harvested in early maturity compared to late maturity tends to be more palatable and have a higher nutrient value. For the average healthy horse, it is a good general rule to purchase hay that is harvested in early to mid maturity. However, hay harvested in late maturity can still serve an important need, as it is a great option for horses considered "easy keepers". These horses tend to need fewer nutrients to sustain a healthy weight; therefore, a lower

quality hay can be used as a filler. The most accurate way to determine the nutrient value of the hay you are purchasing is to have a chemical analysis performed. A core sample from at least 20 bales of hay should be collected and sent to your local county extension office to obtain an accurate measurement of the nutritional contents.

Cleanliness should be at the top of the list of important characteristics when purchasing hay. Visual inspection of the hay and the facility from which you are obtaining your hay prior to purchasing is a way of insuring a good product. There should be no signs of dust or mold present on the hay, nor should there be any foreign materials present. "Dirty" hay can damage the gastrointestinal system following ingestion and respiratory system secondary to inhaling the dust. When visually assessing hay, it is important to know that "dirty" hay doesn't mean that it is brown in appearance. The color is not always a good way to assess whether the hay is of the proper quality. For example, weeds can be green but that doesn't mean we should feed them to our horses. Often hay can change in color due to environmental factors like sun-bleaching or rain leaching causing colors to fade.

Location may play a large factor in the availability of hay in your area. If the quality of hay in your area is not adequate for your horse's nutritional requirements, having hay shipped will increase the overall cost to you, the buyer. Grass hays such as Coastal Bermuda, Tifton, or jiggs are easy to get year round due to its ability to grow in hot, dry climates. This grass is occasionally associated with colic due to ileal impaction in horses. Ileal impactions occur when fine stemmed hay obstructs the last few feet of the small intestine. Horses that develop ileal impactions often have a history of being switched from some other kind of hay to Coastal Bermuda grass type hay. This does not mean that Coastal Bermuda grass hay is a bad choice as many horses can eat Coastal Bermuda grass hay their entire lives and never have a problem. However, it is important to be careful when switching hay types.

Ultimately, whatever hay type you choose, it should be the best quality possible for your individual horse. That's why when deciding which hay is right for your horse, you should consult with your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist to determine how to meet the daily requirements necessary for your horse.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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