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Growing Quality Horse Hay

Many forage crops make good hay for horses provided they are of superior quality. Top quality hay will furnish an abundance of energy and protein and add bulk to the ration. Although properly managed pure grasses or legumes can be grown, grass-legume mixtures offer a variety feed and are generally preferred by horsemen. Nevertheless, well fertilized grasses, such as brome grass or timothy, can be used for horse hay. A complete fertilizer, high in nitrogen, should be applied to grass in the early spring. The nitrogen fertilizer will improve the yield and increase the protein content by the early heading stage from a low of 8% crude protein to 12% or more. And grass hays must be cut at early heading for maximum palatability and feed value.

Pure alfalfa is preferred for hay over pure grass. It should be cut at the very first sign of flowers to ensure an 18% crude protein, highly digestible feed. However, it may be slightly laxative and consequently many horsemen prefer a mixture of alfalfa 10 lbs plus timothy 6 lbs or alfalfa 10 lbs plus brome grass 8 lbs, per acre. Both hay mixtures should be harvested as soon as a flower appears on the alfalfa. On farms where the grass in either mixture is well-adapted, the grass seeding rate can be reduced by a third. This will produce a higher protein hay crop since legumes have about twice the protein content of grasses.

Red clover plants are covered with fine hairs and usually make a dusty hay. Even when mixed with timothy, the hay is difficult to make, cures up quite brown and is slow to dry. This increases the chances of making a dusty, moldy hay particularly during unfavourable weather. Although red clover will grow on a more variable drained field than alfalfa, it is not recommended as a good horse hay.

To make top quality hay, it is essential that it be cut early. Harvested at the stages suggested, a very palatable, nutritious, high yielding hay can be made. Delaying harvest reduces the feeding value and lowers the acceptability of the hay.

Hang onto the leaves. They make a hay appetizing, provide 40 to 50% of the yield and contain 70% of the protein.

Fertilize your hay meadows annually based on a soil test. This will help ensure long meadow life and a palatable hay crop. By practising this and the other suggestions made here, a top quality hay package for horses can be assured.