

"It Is All About How Hay Is Baled"

This time of the year just about anyone with Horses thinks about winter. I realize at first this seems odd with 100 degree weather and it being almost too hot to ride a Horse. I am talking about "HAY" that is correct, a nice big barn full of green - dry bales of hay to feed your Horses this winter. This time of the year cutting and raking and baling hay is in full swing. Yet I have found over the years that some Horse owners really have difficulties distinguishing between good and bad quality Horse hay. I am going to try and cover the basics of hay to make it easier for someone to insure safe clean hay for their Horses.

The first thing to cover is this. It is very important to understand that just because a cow will eat it and be fine, does not mean that a Horse will be fine eating it. For years I have fed cattle hay that was black and moldy smelling dripping with moisture. Also bales that were 90 % weeds and the cattle grew fat and happy. If you feed such hay to a horse you are setting the Horse up for foundering, colic and other types of very serious health issues! The hay or "ROUGHAGE" needs to be harvested and stored dry and be free of dirt and mold along with as little weeds as possible. This will help to insure your Horses of a safe meal and drastically lowering the chances of putting your Horses overall health in harm's way.

"CUTTING THE HAY". The grass should be cut when the ground is predominantly dry. The drier the ground is beneath the cut grass the easier for the grass to dry out. The grass needs enough time to lower its internal moisture so as not to start to break down and rot. In other words if you bale it wet, then it stores wet and moldy hay is all you get. The grass needs to "air out" so as to help in this process. Baling too soon or baling weeds that has so much more internal moisture than grass can lead to moldy hay. There is a simple yet very important process to follow in baling hay. Think of it like a cooking recipe. If you follow the cooking directions then the dish turns out correctly. Start taking short cuts or rushing the cooking time, then all of a sudden your food is not what the recipe stated you would achieve.

"RAKING THE HAY". This is a very simple process of actually turning over the cut grass to allow the underside that has not been exposed to the sun and a summer breeze to dry out as well. Raking the grass also puts the cut grass into nice clean neat fluffy rows (wind rows) to allow the machinery to pick up and put the grass into bales of hay. If raking occurs too quickly after cutting, this will also help to insure wet grass being baled. Once again it is all about the process and following a very simple set of guide lines. Actually looking at "wind rows" of nicely raked grass is the best way to see the quality of the grass and just how dry it is. After cutting and raking has occurred and hopefully it has not rained or had much dew in the morning's it is time for the last part of this process.

"BALING THE HAY". By this time in this process the grass should have been cut dry and raked dry. Hopefully there is not too many weeds, or too many small tree branches or basic human garbage. Such as paper, tin cans and plastic bottles along with other junk. The cleaner the raked hay is the better quality bales you end up with. Looking at the finished bale is not your best opportunity to really see what your Horses have to eat. Each bale whether it is a small square bale or a round bale can conceal all sorts of things that are harmful to a horse. Wet grass or weeds that can turn a nice bale to moldy hay can pass by you very easily. Some type of foreign object that can hurt your Horse when they are eating the hay is also hidden in a bale.

"STORING THE HAY" Let's now say you are confident the bales you have are good clean dry hay. At least 10 to 25 percent of all stored hay goes bad before the Horse ever touches it. Varmints making nests in the hay stack can cause damages to your hay stack. Not to mention leaky roofs and the ground being wet or

moist also plays a part in loosing hay. Try to keep your hay off the dirt ground and even concrete floors. Concrete as well as plain old dirt floors in barns manufacture a small amount of moisture that can turn a dry bale into a moldy bale with a few months of storage time. So storing your hay correctly is part of this process to provide good clean "ROUGHAGE" for your Horses.

Finally I want to mention a few things to consider about round bales versus square bales. Square bales provide you the horse owner the chance to really control how much hay your Horses consume every day. Round bales are supposed to be completely consumed by Horses in a 5 to 8 day period. If a round bale is sitting in front of Horses for weeks you are wasting hay and the quality goes down. Also round bales should be in a round bale feeder to protect the bale from Horses lying on the hay. Small square bales should be fed off the ground to prevent objects and sand and dirt from being consumed by your horses. I realize the "REAL WORLD OF HORSES" is not as exact or perfect as this article states. You buy what you can budget for and you feed what works best for your lifestyle. Yet that being said please remember the recipe for a good bale of hay. CUT IT DRY AND THEN RAKE IT DRY, THEN BALE IT DRY. Buying hay from a feed store or from a farmer/rancher is no different. Prices may vary and so will the quality yet you need to shop and inspect the hay. It is difficult to know what is wrapped up in a big round bale. At least with square bales you can open up a bale now and then to see what you are getting. Take care and shop wisely and remember hay is always cheaper in the summer months than during the winter months!

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