

QUALITY HAY FOR HORSES

Tips for baling hay that horse owners want.

If you bale hay to sell to a horse owner, you need to know what the buyer wants. The difference between fair and good hay not only means several dollars more per bale. Many horse owners won't even consider hay that doesn't meet their high standards.

Krishona Martinson and Paul Peterson, University of Minnesota Extension agronomists, have some guidelines that help both hay makers and hay buyers.

- ▶ Bale forage at 15 to 17 percent moisture. For small square bales, you can manage up to 20 percent moisture without spoilage. Hay baled at 25 percent or higher is more likely to suffer heat damage to the forage and grow mold.
- ▶ With grass hay, bale just as the seed heads are beginning to form. Past that stage, the hay will have thicker stems, more fiber, less protein and decreasing levels of digestible energy. The goal is to have hay with softer, smaller stems.
- ▶ For alfalfa or clover hay, harvest when the legume is about at the 10 percent flowering stage.
- ▶ Don't test hay just after baling. How it has cured and stored will change nutrients. Test hay after it's been stored.
- ▶ Hay can sometimes smell sweet, but that is not an indicator of quality. The sweet smell comes because the sugars in the hay have caramelized. Open a bale to look for mold.
- ▶ Hay for horses should be stored inside, protected from the sun and rain, and preferably stored off the ground. Studies show that up to 50 percent of a hay bale can be ruined when stored where moisture can be wicked up from the ground.
- ▶ Grass hay is better for mature horses. Its fiber is easier to digest than legume hay at the same stage. However, alfalfa and clover hays usually have higher protein content than grasses. That makes those hays good for young horses. Some buyers like a mixture. Horse stable owner Brad Thatcher (page 12) buys hay that is 90 percent timothy and 10 percent alfalfa.

