

Winter Munchies

Don't let your feeding program slip behind during the cooler months.

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Winter feeding programs for the Southeast are always a challenge. When will cold weather arrive? How cold will it get? How long will the cold weather last? How much moisture will we have in the late fall, winter and early spring? The Southeast – from North Georgia to South Florida – is also quite variable in which perennial grasses are used, so winter feeding programs are locally unique.

Pastures

Pastures in the Southeast vary considerably in winter. In some areas, the subtropical perennials go dormant late in the fall and are not available until summer rains appear. In other areas, cool weather and short days reduce growth rate and lower nutrient content, but some growth persists throughout the winter. In other areas, grass grows better in winter than any other time of the year. If you are new to your location, your county agricultural extension office or local feed store can provide basic information. In most areas, winter permanent pastures will be less productive and have lower nutritive value than in spring and summer. Dr. Ott

Planting winter pastures

In some areas of the Southeast, planting winter pastures is the best way to provide your horse with high-quality forage. Ryegrass is most commonly used, but any cereal grains such as oats, wheat and rye also work. Ryegrass has a longer growing season, but it requires more moisture than cereal grains. Consequently, a dry fall and winter can restrict its growth. Ryegrass can be overseeded on perennial pastures in late October or November. Take care to acclimate horses to the availability of the lush forage. Turning a stalled horse out on a lush ryegrass field is a formula for laminitis. Instead, fill the horse with hay and then allow turnout for only a few hours. Repeat the next day, and gradually increase time on the ryegrass. After a couple of weeks the horse can be left out for extended periods. It is usually advisable to continue to feed hay to horses on winter pastures because of the high moisture content of the forage. Hay slows down the rate of passage and increases the animal's digestive efficiency.

Hay

Hay is the dried form of a forage crop. It usually contains 86 to 90 percent dry matter (10 to 14 percent moisture) and maintains its nutritive value for extended periods. Most hay is harvested in late spring, summer and early fall. It is sun-cured to remove moisture and then baled in either square

(rectangular) bales or round bales. Horse hay should be stored indoors to prevent nutrient loss and mold, which is caused by excess moisture. Square bales are easier to handle, they stack readily in a small space and are easy to feed, especially to stalled horses. Round bales are less expensive per pound of hay, but must be handled by mechanical equipment. They are easier to feed to groups of horses because a single bale lasts longer. Use of bale feeders to reduce loss of waste.

Hay choices

Coastal bermudagrass hay is the most popular horse hay in the Southeast. Other bermudagrasses are also available, such as Alecia, Callie, and Tifton 85. These generally have similar acceptance and nutrient value. Other locally grown hays include fescue, pangola, stargrass and the perennial (rhizoma) peanut. The perennial peanut is the alfalfa of the Southeast. It is palatable, has a high nutrient content and is highly digestible. Horse owners also purchase hay shipped in from the North and West. Most popular and generally most expensive is western alfalfa. This hay contains about twice as much protein and three to four times as much calcium as the grasses. Other popular hays from the North include timothy, orchardgrass, bromegrass and timothy/alfalfa mix. Selection of the right hay depends upon local availability, price and the type of animal you are feeding.

Nutrient value of hays

Hays vary in nutritive value depending upon species, fertilization programs, maturity, harvesting and storage procedures. The only way to know what you are feeding is to send representative samples to an accredited laboratory. Table 1 is provided as a general guide to the nutrient content of various hays. Note that the grass hays are all very similar in composition. They provide about 0.7 to 0.85 Mcal DE/lb, vary from 7 to 10 percent in protein and have calcium concentrations of 0.35 to 0.45 percent. Legume hays are higher in energy (about 1.0 Mcal/lb), have 15 to 18 percent C protein and contain about 1.35 percent calcium. Other important nutrients vary more due to harvesting and storage than due to species.

Hay quality

This term relates more to the physical desirability of the product than it does the nutrient content or the appearance. Anti-quality factors in hay include: excess maturity, dust, mold, weeds, insects and low nutrient content due to leaching. (Leaching occurs when hay is rained on during harvest and can be detected visually by examining the hay from the interior of a bale for a grey or dark brown appearance.) Hay with a bright green appearance has usually been harvested and stored properly, but

this is no assurance of the nutrient content. Excess maturity can be detected by looking at the product. Stem size increases, and leaf proportion decreases, with maturity. To detect dust and mold, put your nose between the flakes and take a deep breath.

Shaking the flake also gives you a clue about dust and mold content. Weeds are easiest to detect by taking a bale apart flake by flake. Most hays will have some species not considered the dominant forage, but if significant amounts of broadleaf weeds appear in a grass hay, have them examined to determine their species before you feed. Toxic weeds can be toxic in hay as well as in pastures. Examine all alfalfa hay for blister beetles. This insect is not as common as it was several years ago, but if your horse consumes only a few blister beetles it can be fatal. If you are feeding alfalfa hay, ask your county agricultural extension agent for information on this insect.

Supplementing the forage

Most horses require supplemental feed to provide additional energy, protein, minerals and vitamins.

Concentrates (sweet feeds or pelleted feeds)- When horses need additional energy, that is, the animal cannot consume enough forage to meet its energy needs, a concentrate should be fed. In comparison to the energy content of the hays shown in Table 1, concentrates provide 1.5 to 1.65 Mcal DE/lb of dry matter. Working horses might need 5 to 10 pounds of concentrate daily plus all the hay they will eat. Lactating mares usually need more concentrate because of high demands of milk production. The concentrate also provides other nutrients to the animal. Concentrates vary from 10 percent to 18 percent protein. The proper protein content is dictated by the animal's requirement and the forage being fed. A 2-year-old in training might need only a 10 percent protein concentrate if it is fed alfalfa hay, but it might need a 14 percent protein concentrate if fed Coastal bermudagrass hay. Mineral and vitamin content of concentrates are usually matched to the forage prevalent in the area to ensure adequate intake of these nutrients.

Mineral supplements

For easy keepers, and for horses able to consume adequate energy and protein from forage, no concentrate is needed, and a complete mineral supplement should be offered free choice to ensure adequate mineral intake. If the concentrate is fed at 0.5 pounds per 100 pounds of bodyweight daily, a free-choice trace mineralized salt should provide adequate minerals. If less concentrate is fed, a complete mineral is recommended