

How To Choose Good Hay

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What is hay ? Hay is defined at its very basic level as dried grass. In reality , there are many steps and chemicals that can go into the making of “dried grass”:

Hay can be grass (example: bermuda, johnson, timothy or sudan grass) or grain (example: barley, oat or rye grass) or a legume (example: clover, bird's foot trefoil or alfalfa) or a blend of any grass, legume or grain. Depending on where you live, the available hay will be whatever can be grown locally.

A good hayman knows his crop and when to cut it. Grain hays must be cut before the heads of grain (soft dough and hard dough stage) can shatter leaving worthless straw behind. The legume hays are cut in the prebloom and full bloom stages ,otherwise you get seed heads instead of succulent blossoms. Grass hays have their own problems. Bermuda and Johnson grass are considered pest plants in certain states. Sudan grass used to have a problem with cyanide. .If you cut it or pastured your animals at the wrong time, they died of cyanide poisoning. Just a little problem there! Timothy hay is generally used by the racehorse industry and they are willing to contract for the next year's crop, so getting some can be very difficult.

All hays must go through certain steps before they can be called “hay”. The first step is the cutting of the field. Depending on the outside temperature and wind conditions, the freshly cut plant material will be allowed to dry. If the weather is colic , the plant material will be spread out on the field. If the weather is hot, the plant material is raked into “windrows”. If the weather is very hot, the plant material can be cut in the morning, raked by lunch time and baled by evening.

The skill to judging moisture content of “raked” plant material is the key to good quality. Too much moisture, mold can grow or the plant material can generate so much fermentation heat, that it can spontaneous combust. If your bale of hay has gray-green mold inside or smells burned or even has charred edges, it was baled too wet. Return to the hay dealer immediately, it is garbage !

If the plant material is baled too dry, then the proper “sweating” will not occur . It doesn't matter what shape your bale of hay is. Most common is the rectangle bale weighing about 75 lbs. There are also round bales that look like balls and some huge bales that look like jelly rolls. All bales must go through a “sweating” period usually 21 days. This usually takes place in the field or beside the field as the heat generated during this “sweating “ period can cause spontaneous combustion. Many a hay barn has burned due to that miscalculation!

Once the plant material has gone through this sweating period, it can be called hay. Hay comes in several grades. The USDA has some hay classifications that are used by the industry:

PREMIUM: Early maturity (i.e. prebloom in legumes and pre-head in grass hays), extra leafy (50% or more leaves) and fine stemmed-factors indicative of a high nutritive and protein content. Hay is green and free of rain damage. This category is commonly referred to by the industry as horse hay, rabbit hay and/or for retail and specialty sales, but would also include dairy and feedlot outlets as potential end users.

GOOD: Early to average maturity (i.e. early to mid-bloom in legumes, up to 25% bloom) and early head in grass hays, leafy (40% or more leaves), fine to medium stemmed, free of rain damage other than slight discoloration. This category is commonly referred to by the trade as dairy hay, but also includes hay shipped to feedlots.

FAIR: Late maturity (i.e. mid to late bloom in legumes), head- in grass hays, less than 50% leaf content and coarse stemmed. Hay may show slight rain damage. This category is commonly referred to by the trade as feedlot or feeder hay.

LOW: Hay in very late maturity, such as mature seed pods in legumes or mature head in grass hays, coarse stemmed. This category could include hay discounted due to insect or excessive weather damage and heavy weed content or mold. Defects will be identified in market reports when using this category.

There are other measures used to define or categorize hay depending on the local. Kansas has its own system for hay. They test hay for relative feed value (RFV) so people can figure out how much hay to feed to an animal. They also test for blister beetle contamination as that is very deadly to horses. Who knows-it could be deadly to rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas.

As general recommendation- always by loose hay if you can . Go the local horse people and buy from them or buy from their dealers. Horses are very sensitive to molds, mycotoxins and blister beetles. Buy local hay so shipping and transportation costs don't put you out of business. There are pros and cons to feeding the various types of hays. It is better to feed one type of hay all year round as any rapid changes in the diet can cause stomach problems. It can take at least 6 weeks for the bacteria in the gut to change populations so they can deal with the different type of hay. **Always add a new feed into the existing diet very slowly!** It could be a matter of life and death for your animal. «•»