

The Grass Is Always Green, but Your Hay Might Not Be.

Equus May 1998, #249 pp. 24 & Dairy Herd Management July 1998 pp. 16

For a quick and easy eyeball exam, the color of your hay can tell you a few things about its condition, quality and nutritional content. First, know your hay — is it grass or legume? If it is grass, is it timothy, oat, rye, barley, Bermuda, Sudan, brome, orchard, Johnson, or fescue? Or if it is legume hay, is it alfalfa, birds foot trefoil, vetch or one of the many clover species? Each type of hay will have a slightly different color, smell and texture.

Grass Hays:

If your bale is light gold color on the outside, [except for oat or barley] and green inside -your hay is sun-bleached. As long as the inside hay smells fresh, feels soft and flexible, you can feed it. You have lost some nutritional value, but not much. If your hay is coarse and quite yellow [again unless oat or barley] then they cut the hay too late. It is best to cut grass hays in the “soft dough” stage. This is where the grain is inside the leaf sheaths or just poking out of the leaf sheath. If the hay is clean and is to be used as fiber in a well-balanced diet, then go ahead and feed it. If you plan to use it as the primary feed however, then don't use it.

Barley and oat hay are commonly cut in the hard dough stage. The hay grower gets more poundage but the nutritional content can really go down. Grain hays like oats and barley are prone to “shattering”. Shattering means the grain falls off the stem (like in threshing the grain). The best part of the grain hay may end up on the barn floor, leaving you with a very high fiber hay with little or no protein or carbohydrate content. Very expensive straw.

Grass and Legume Hays:

Now hay that has been overheated from being baked in the sun or over fermented from being stored with too high moisture content is brown. There may be a musty, moldy odor to the inside of the hay. Brown hay will probably have mold. This hay should go directly to the garbage. Don't feed it! Moldy hay can cause major healthy problems —respiratory, digestive, and reproductive. Death can be an end result. Get your money back from the dealer!

Hay that is dark brown or black has been exposed to excessive moisture (rain or dew) or overheated and burned. Yes, hay can burn during the “sweating” period. Don't even open the bale, get your money refunded or refuse it. In fact, the hay dealer should not have even sold it to you!! Change hay dealers!

When buying hay, make sure you obtain as much information as you can about its production and harvest management. Ask if there is a quality analysis information available. (Commonly done for racetrack and dairy) If not, test it for its nutritive content before using as feed. You might have to supplement with a different concentrate to compensate for higher or lower nutritive value. Examine the hay to determine its stage of maturity at harvest. Buy native grass hays that have been harvested locally, it can save you money in transportation costs. Do not buy hay containing excessive weed, dirt, or stick content or highly objectionable types of weeds (i.e.. loco weed etc.) or with insect infestations. Do not purchase hay just based upon color- check it, twist it, smell it etc. Never, never buy hay that is moldy or wet. «•»