

Early Harvest Is Essential In Making Dairy-Quality Grass Hay

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The use of perennial grasses for high-quality dairy feed throughout much of Pennsylvania is common. Unfortunately, the quality of the harvested forage is less than dairy-quality.

The key factor in harvesting dairy-quality forage is harvest management.

Recent research conducted by Dr. Jerry Cherney at Cornell University showed that plant development varies with grass species, but forage quality decline was consistent across all species. In other words, the forage species is not as important as timely harvest in obtaining high-quality forage.

Reed canarygrass, bromegrass, tall fescue, and timothy were harvested at various stages of development and tested for quality. According to Cherney, the research showed that fiber digestion and other quality parameters decline with increased maturity.

The magnitude and rate of quality decline with maturity are much more important than quality differences between individual species. Cherney also suggested that producers should consider harvesting their pure grass stands in the spring for dairy feed before they harvest alfalfa in order to produce acceptable grass quality.

In other research presented at the recent American Society of Agronomy meetings, results indicate that spring harvest of later maturing varieties of cool-season grass species are lower in quality than early maturing varieties. When an early and late maturing variety of orchardgrass were harvested at the same stage of maturity, the early maturing variety had greater quality than the late maturing variety.

The research suggested that the lower quality was the result of higher temperatures during the

growth of the late-maturing variety relative to the temperatures in which the earlier maturing variety grew.

However, the difference in quality between late and earlier maturing grasses was minor compared to the drop in quality associated with delaying the first harvest of either variety.

In summary, the use of cool-season grasses for dairy-quality feed requires harvesting the grasses earlier than normal. Delay in grass harvest and not grass species is the major factor in producing low-quality grass hay or silage.

Consider harvesting grasses before you would normally harvest

alfalfa to obtain high quality forage that is suitable for dairy animals.

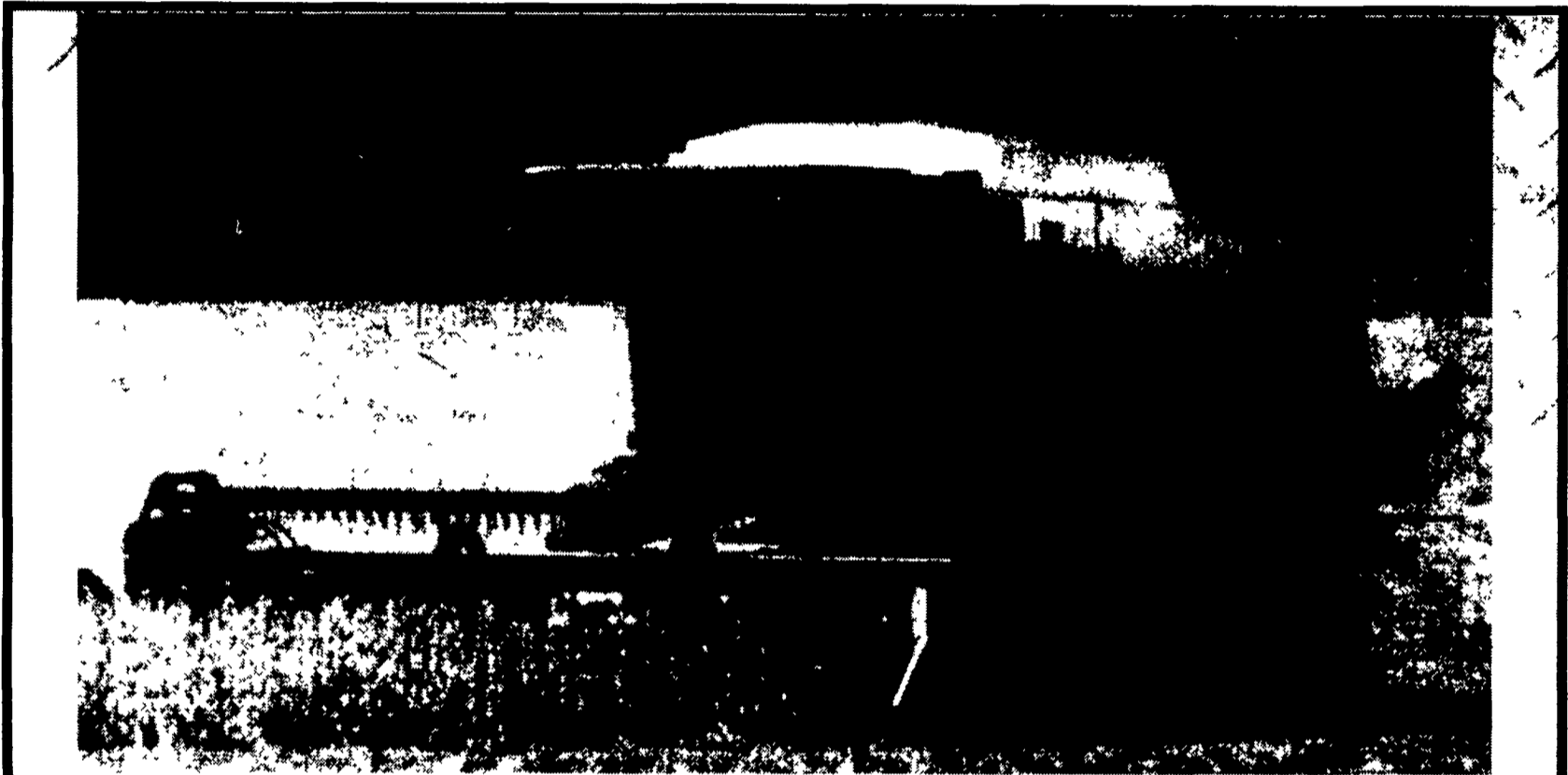
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