

Consider Alfalfa For Your Horse's Feeding Program

MADISON, Wis. — Once considered unsuitable for horses because it was "too nutritious," alfalfa has become established as the premier forage for horses.

The high levels of energy, protein, minerals, and vitamins contained in alfalfa are why purebred breeders and trainers nationwide have made high quality alfalfa the centerpiece of their horse nutritional programs.

Horses have developed a reputation for being complicated animals to feed, largely because they are more sensitive to dietary changes, nutritional imbalances and physical characteristics of feed than other classes of livestock.

Basing a horse's nutritional program on high quality alfalfa reduces many of the problems associated with feeding traditional high grain diets; alfalfa supplies high levels of energy, minerals, and protein while also providing sufficient fiber for proper digestive health.

Nutritional Factors To Consider

Alfalfa contains virtually every nutrient required for proper nutrition of horses.

However, it is commonly recommended that a reduced quantity of alfalfa be fed with some grain supplementation to prevent feeding of excessive levels of protein and calcium.

The table shows the nutritional requirements of various classes of horses and typical diets containing high quality alfalfa (harvested at first flower) that can be fed to meet these needs.

The general rule of thumb is that a mature horse will eat approximately two percent of its body weight daily. Grain should not exceed 50 percent of the diet, and more than six pounds of grain per day should be fed in two separate feedings at least six hours apart.

Always allow horses free-choice access to water, salt, and a phosphorous-containing mineral supplement.

Physical Factors Affecting Alfalfa Utilization By Horses

Stem texture, stem diameter, and leafiness have all been shown to impact alfalfa palatability and utilization by horses. The horse is more apt to sort forage than other livestock species and will commonly refuse to eat coarse-textured stems.

Alfalfa varieties selected for higher forage quality (i.e. the W-L HQ line) generally possess finer stems and greater leafiness, both characteristics that improve palatability and utilization when fed to horses. Alfalfa hay with finer stems and softer stem texture is more attractive to horses, contributing to greater intake and less wastage when fed.

Anti-Quality Factors Should Be Avoided

Anti-quality factors most commonly affect horses include: molds, dustiness, blister beetles, and toxic weeds. Moldy hay is usually caused by baling hay before it is sufficiently dry, and should never be fed to horses. Because the horse is not a ruminant, they are unable to degrade mold toxins during digestion, and thus are very sensitive to the presence of even small amounts of mold toxins in their diets.

Dustiness (often caused by rain damage or by being baled too dry) can often be eliminated by soaking the hay in water prior to feeding. Presoaking all hay, whether dusty or not, has been shown to significantly reduce the incidence of respiratory problems in horses fed alfalfa hay.

One of the most commonly discussed, and infrequently observed, concerns with alfalfa feeding to horses is the presence of blister beetles. The blister beetle contains the compound cantharidin, which is extremely toxic to horses, even in small amounts.

Managing alfalfa hay prior to harvest has proven effective in reducing or eliminating blister beetle infestations; under no circumstance should blister beetle-infected alfalfa be fed to any animal.

Alfalfa hay intended for horse diets should be virtually weed free. Certain weeds, such as nightshade, can be toxic to horses.

In addition, weeds slow the drying rate of alfalfa hay, which often leads to molds and dustiness. If a significant quantity of weeds are observed in a lot of hay, an alternative source of forage should be considered.

In conclusion, proper nutrition, including the feeding of high quality alfalfa varieties (e.g. WL 325HQ) will greatly enhance the performance, health, and longevity of a horse and can significantly reduce supplemental feed costs and veterinary bills.

— W-L Research
Madison, Wis.

Types Of Feeds

Ann Swinker
State Extension
Horse Specialist
Penn State

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Roughage/Forage Roughage

Found in hay or grass, is the bulk of the horse's food. Grass

or alfalfa hay, or a combination of the two, are good sources of roughage.

Grass hay is generally higher in fiber and dry matter than alfalfa, but alfalfa may be higher

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