

### *The most expensive part of horse ownership . . .*

The cost of feeding a horse is the most expensive part of ownership. The delicate nature of the horse's digestive system requires high-quality feed ingredients that command a high price. This fact has many horsemen constantly on the lookout for a way to moderate this pricey portion of horse ownership.

The first place many look is how to reduce the price of the bulkiest portion of the ration - namely the roughage. Roughage includes grass, legumes (like alfalfa and clover) and hay.

During the dog days of summer, many horse owners rely on pasture as a money-saving way to furnish roughage to their young horses. However, it is at this time that the grass plant is maturing and, due to age and oftentimes drought conditions, is losing much of its nutritional value.

Many young horses, especially yearlings, fill up on this depleted grass and, even if they are being grained, are in a nutrient-deficient situation. One solution to this common scenario is to increase the amount and quality of the grain portion of the ration by individually feeding yearlings.

The biggest drawback to this approach is that it is more expensive and time-consuming.

When grass is not available, hay becomes the prime source of roughage. The practice of feeding high-quality hay to horses has been around for thousands of years. The best hay comes from the second cutting of the grass. This cutting usually has fewer weeds and the plants are still young enough to have high nutritional value.

Quality hay is free of dust and mold, has a high leaf content, a low stem content and is a good green color. The



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green color comes from chlorophyll, which is not a nutrient for the horse but simply a color indicator of the degree of oxidation.

The less oxidation, the greener the hay. As the chlorophyll is broken down (oxidized), the hay turns brown - an indication that other nutrients such as vitamins and proteins are also being

destroyed.

This is why most horsemen believe that the greener the hay the more quality it has.

But what about that dust and mold factor? Most horsemen know that dusty, moldy hay can cause major digestive problems, but all hay has some dust in it. How much is tolerable?

The answer is that the lowest amount is best because dusty, moldy hay is not only a factor in colic but also in allergies. Like people, different horses have different reactions to allergens. Heaves is a result of dust and mold in hyper-allergenic horses. It is thought that dusty feed is a culprit in exercise-induced pulmonary hemorrhage (bleeders), and we know moon blindness is also an allergic reaction.

This emphasizes the fact that clean hay is essential to good horse management. Some producers try to increase economic efficiency by feeding round-baled hay. While this is a feasible approach, this type of forage should meet the same high standards as that of quality square bales. This means that the round bales should not be exposed to the elements, particularly rain, either while being stored or fed. They should be produced from the same high-quality forages as other acceptable hays.

In short, there are very few shortcuts to feeding horses high-quality forage if you are trying to produce healthy, athletic animals.

Our conclusion is that if the horses you have are not worth the high cost of quality feed, get better horses or reduce the number of animals you have.

— Dr. Jim and Lynda McCall