

What type of hay do you feed your horse, grass or legume?

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Did you know when your horse is grazing in the pasture he can select from three types of forages? Most pastures ideally contain a combination of forages. There are three types of forages that can be found in pastures grasses, legumes, or forbs and keeping in mind the varieties may vary depending on the geographical location (e.g. Southeast versus Mountain States). Grasses would include both cool and warm season plants. Some forages such as timothy, fescue or orchard grass (cool season grasses) will grow in the cooler seasons such as late fall to early spring or when temperatures reach 7 degrees Celsius. Bermuda, Bahia and brome grass (warm season grasses) will grow when the seasons are warmer such as mid April to September and the temperature reaches 15 degrees Celsius.

Legumes such as alfalfa, sericea lespedeza and clover grow well with grasses and “fix” nitrogen from the atmosphere and add nitrogen to the soil. Forbs are typically broad leaf plants and some may be weeds. Donkeys and goats tend to browse on forbs. The variety of forage as well as stage of maturity greatly affects the nutritional value. For example, legumes are generally higher in nutritional content than grasses but depending on the variety of grass and the stage of growth it’s very possible that the grass can be as high in digestible energy as a legume.

When selecting hay it’s important to keep in mind the variety of hay, is it grass or legume hay? Other things to consider when judging quality are the color, dusty content, odor, and leafiness. Typically legume varieties will have more leaves and leaves contain more nutrients than stems due to a lower amount of structural carbohydrates. Older and more mature hay may have seed heads present and this is indicative of lower nutrient value. Hay that is greener in color will likely have a higher concentration of vitamins such as vitamin A and D as well as more nutrients. Legume hays are typically higher in calcium, phosphorus and magnesium. In addition, legume hay is typically higher in percent of crude protein (74%) compared to grass hay around 54% crude protein. The amount of digestible energy is normally higher in legume hay than grass. Although grass hay can be higher in crude protein and digestible energy depending on the factors discussed earlier such as stage of maturity and the variety of grass or legume. However, it’s most important to keep in mind the nutritional needs of your horse - if your horse does light work then grass hay may supply more than enough nutrients to meet its needs but if your horse is in foal and in the last three months then a higher digestible energy source of hay maybe a better choice. So, when selecting hay base the your feeding protocol first on the energy requirements of your horse and then on the variety and quality

factors hay as well as availability in your area when you purchase either grass or legume hay. In some parts of the country legume hay maybe more expensive and the quality maybe poor, in this situation the owner may want to supplement the horse's diet with concentrates (grain) and if needed feed several small meals throughout the day with the hay that is available to meet the horse's energy requirements.

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