

# CONSERVATION *Journal*

A Conservation Education Initiative of Tri-County/City Soil and Water Conservation District

## Equine: *What Should I Feed My Horse*

by Diane Beyer, District Manager, TCCSWCD

Basically, feed for horses can be divided into three categories: pasture, hay and concentrates.

### **Pasture**

The most natural food for horses is good quality pasture. Most mature pleasure horses doing light work will do well on pasture alone if they have sufficient grazing. However, horses are selective grazers and need a large area to meet their nutritional needs. Just because a field is green does not mean it contains sufficient grazing for a horse, and depending on where you live, for a large part of the year pasture is not available.

You can optimize the amount of grazing available by dividing your pasture into sections and rotating your horses through the different paddocks. That way, you give the grass a chance to grow back and can pick up the manure.

### **Hay**

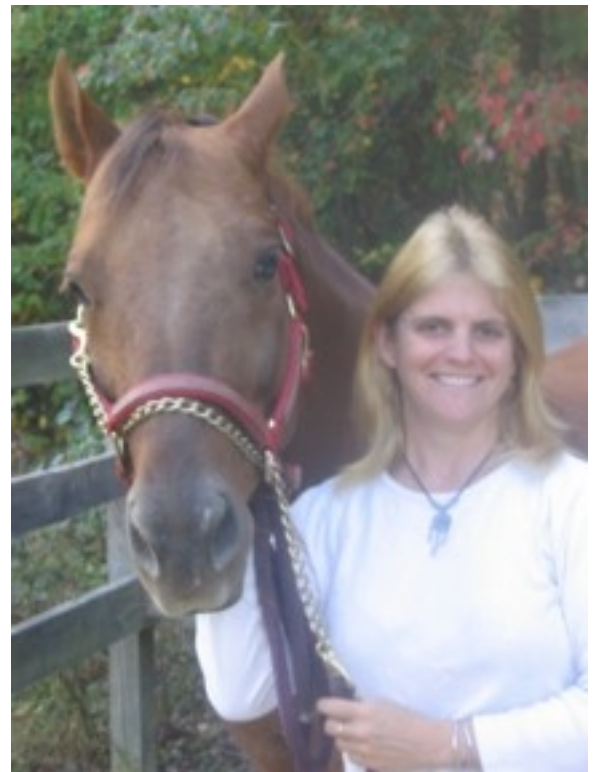
Hay is the basic food of domestic horses. Only feed good quality hay to horses. Inspect hay carefully before buying it, asking the seller to open a bale. Make sure the bales are green and dust and mold free. Stick your hand down into the center of a bale to make sure it's not warm. Feeding moldy hay can cause colic and dusty hay can cause respiratory problems. (To avoid dust, it's a good idea to pull the flakes apart and shake them out well before feeding. As a precaution, you can also soak hay before feeding.)

The type of hay available varies according to the area you live in. Check out the article, *Horses Eat Hay Too*, by John Howe, Extension Agent, Animal Science, Virginia Cooperative Extension, for information on hay for this area of Virginia. The article is located on our equine page.

Alfalfa is also available in cubes and pellets. However, horses need chew time to be content, so except for veterinary reasons, most people feed some hay. Some horses have a tendency to choke on cubes. To be safe, you can soften cubes with water before feeding. Do not feed your horse grass clippings as they can cause founder.

### **Concentrates**

Hay alone cannot provide enough nutrition for hard-working horses, pregnant and nursing mares, or growing youngsters. They need concentrates to supplement the hay. However, hay should still provide the bulk of the diet. Feeding too much grain can cause problems.



Concentrates include grains (whole, rolled or cracked), sweet feed (grain mixed with molasses), and manufactured feeds (pellets, cubes, or extruded). You can buy bags of feed specially formulated for every stage of a horse's life from creep feed for foals to feed for senior equines. Beet pulp provides additional bulk. Beet pellets must be soaked before feeding to allow them to expand. If you use hot water, they expand in about an hour, but with cold water, allow overnight soaking. Only prepare enough for one day's feeding at a time.

### ***Does My Horse Need Anything Else?***

Horses need lots of drinking water and an adequate amount of salt and minerals.

### ***Water***

Fresh water is a vital part of your horse's diet. Horses drink from 5 to 10 gallons a day. Clean water should be available at all times except when the horse is very hot from work. As you cool out your horse, allow him to take several small drinks rather than giving him free access to water.

While horses can survive on snow in the winter, it is far from ideal. The horse's body has to melt a lot of snow to get enough water, thus wasting body heat. A horse not getting enough water is more liable to impaction colic. An inexpensive stock tank heater can keep the water trough ice-free.

### ***Salt & Minerals***

A mineralized salt block should be available free-choice. You can also buy a variety of other vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements. Consult your veterinarian.

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