Grasses Grown in South Florida Make Good Hay for Horses

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Alfalfa is considered to be a premier hay for horses. However, alfalfa hay is expensive, especially in Florida where it is not grown and must be imported from long distances. Additionally, most horses do not need a hay of that quality or cost. Thus, Florida horse owners continually seek substitutes that are less costly.

Florida can grow a legume called perennial peanut which has similar quality to alfalfa. This relative of the edible peanut produces excellent quality hay and is in great demand by horse owners. Unfortunately, the limited acreage available and problems of making quality hay during the summer, when perennial peanut grows best, has resulted in greater demand than supply.

Over the years many grasses developed by University of Florida research programs have proven to be excellent hay for horses. Pangolagrass hay has been successfully grown and fed to horses in Florida for fifty years. However, Pangola stands have been continually lost to spittlebugs and common bermudagrass, and its supply has become limited.

In recent years ‘Coastal’ bermudagrass has been the dominant hay fed to horses in Florida. However, it is produced mostly in north Florida, Georgia and Alabama. Again, hauling costs greatly increases the price of Coastal bermudagrass hay to many Florida horse owners.

In the research program at the Range Cattle REC, Dr. Paul Mislevy evaluated stargrasses and bermudagrasses for cattle production. There is considerable interest on the use of these forages for horses. We feel that stargrasses and bermudagrasses that grow well in south Florida can be used to make good quality hay for horses. The Range Cattle REC has grown and fed the ‘Ona’ stargrass variety to working quarter horses for many years with good success. Dr. Mislevy has worked with a number of horse owners throughout south Florida on the production and utilization of ‘Florona’ and other stargrass varieties for horses with excellent results.

A criticism of stargrass hay is its stems are coarser than bermudagrass hay. Dr. Mislevy has evaluated two bermudagrass varieties as forage for cattle. Both are relatively
persistent, produce good yields and have excellent potential as hay for horses. These two varieties are available in south Florida as ‘Florakirk’ and ‘Tifton 85’. Both varieties originated from the Coastal Plain Experiment Station at Tifton, Georgia, the birth place of Coastal bermudagrass.

Florakirk and Tifton 85 bermudagrasses are of similar quality to Coastal bermudagrass, a favorite for feeding horses throughout Florida. These grasses will contain 10 to 12% protein and 55 to 60% digestibility when harvested after 4 to 5 weeks of growth with proper fertilization and good growing weather. Many hay producers and horse owners think that a grass hay for horses must contain 17 to 22% protein like alfalfa. To obtain this quality measure, grasses must be heavily fertilized and harvested at an immature stage of growth with an abundance of leaf and very fine stems. This type hay can result in intestinal impaction or colic due to inadequate chewing and/or lowered water intake. Although nutritive value decreases with maturity, hay with 4 weeks of growth provides acceptable nutritive value with minimal risk. It should also be pointed out that for most feeding programs, the high protein content of alfalfa and other legumes exceeds the needs of horses, so grass hays containing 8 to 12% protein are suitable.

Another point on any type hay produced in Florida relates to the usual high humidity and occasional rain fall during the hay making season, which may result in hay being too moist when baled and stored. High moisture can lead to molding, to which horses are very sensitive. However, good quality, dry hay can be made during the spring and fall periods. Producers and buyers should be certain that hay is less than 15% moisture when baled, stored, and fed to horses.

Sand ingestion can be a cause of colic in horses in Florida. This is usually an intermittent, mild colic, but may become severe if sand forms an impaction in the intestines. Sand ingestion can result from feeding hay and other feedstuffs on sandy ground, overgrazed pastures, or use of dirty feed bunks. This can be prevented by feeding adequate amounts of good, clean hay in racks and keeping feed bunks free of sand and other debris.

Many grasses grown in Florida make good hay for horses. ‘Florakirk’ and ‘Tifton 85’ bermudagrasses are similar in quality to ‘Coastal' bermudagrass hay successfully fed by thousands of Florida horse owners for years. Stargrass has a slightly coarser stem than bermudagrass, but makes good hay for horses. Bermudagrass and stargrass hays should be harvested at a 4 to 5 week growth stage, dried to less than 15% moisture, and stored in a dry area.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate