

# SERVICE IN ACTION

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE

## Selecting quality horse hay

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### Quick Facts

Selecting quality hay is the most important factor in providing low cost rations for horses.

Stage of maturity at harvest is probably the most critical factor influencing nutrient content and quality of hay.

A high proportion of leaves is desired since they contain two-thirds of the plant nutrients.

Chemical analysis of hay is a valuable guide in selection.

Hay should be purchased by the ton, not by the bale.

• **Leafiness.** A high proportion of leaves is desired since they contain two-thirds of the plant nutrients. Leaves are high in protein and energy resulting in increased digestibility. Stems are high in fiber and low in protein and energy with lower digestibility.

—Immature plants will contain a high percentage of leaves.

—As a plant matures, the ratio of stem to leaf will increase, making it a less desirable way.

—Avoid over-dried hay that has excess leaf-shatter.

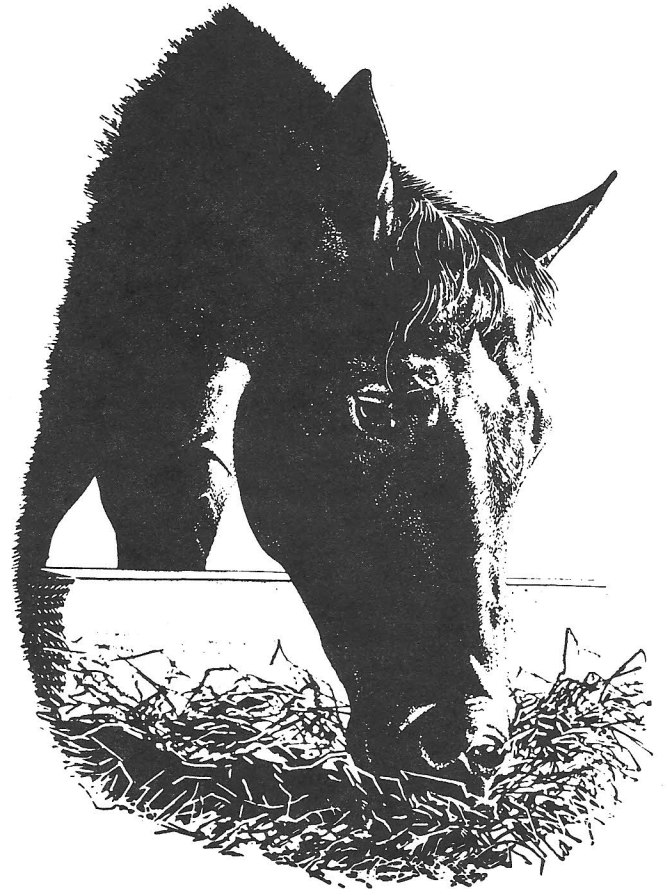
Selecting high quality hay is the most important factor in providing low-cost rations for horses. Hay can be an economical source of protein, energy, vitamins and minerals, or it can be an expensive source of indigestible fiber. Consider the following criteria when growing or purchasing hay for horses:

• **Plant maturity.** The stage of maturity at harvest is probably the most critical factor influencing nutrient content and quality of hay. Concentrations for all important feed nutrients decline with maturity of the plant. High-fiber mature hay contains less nutrients and these nutrients are lower in digestibility.

—The presence of large stems and seedheads indicate a mature hay and are undesirable in grass hays. Grasses should be cut by the boot stage (no heads showing).

—Legumes should contain a high leaf content and should be cut by first flower (appearance of the first flowers in the field).

—Abundance of leaves and lack of seedheads or full blooms indicate an immature hay, which is highest in energy and protein and lowest in fiber.



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