

Feeding the Southwestern Horse

Tips that also apply to all horses.

By Katharine Lark

NO MATTER where you live in the United States, there are specific soil deficiencies, limited types of feeds available, and varying prices and weather conditions, all of which contribute to the difficult task of balancing a horse's ration.

In the Southwest, the majority of rations are based on alfalfa. Nutritious and appealing to horses, alfalfa hay and pellets or cubes are an excellent base for an equine diet. High in protein and calcium, alfalfa is often grown on phosphorus-deficient soils. Since the calcium/phosphorus ratio in the diet is critical (especially in youngsters), a source of phosphorus must be available. Now, grains do provide this source in varying degrees, but grains are energy feeds and should not be fed in large amounts to idle horses.

Often a horse that is bored and in need of extra hay to satisfy his grazing instinct can become too fat on large amounts of alfalfa. This is when a grass or grain hay as half the hay ration becomes useful. Oat hay is a good choice, as are Bermuda, rye mixes, and wheat grass hays. The grass hays to avoid are: fescues, they can have a fungus that causes photosensitivity; Johnson grass, it can contain cyanide; and Sudan, which can cause urinary problems.

A grain ration should provide energy for work and exercise and be reduced on idle days. Mixed sweet feeds are always available and usually balanced for the area. Sometimes, though, the molasses will cause excessive sweating and a homemade mix may better serve in hot weather.

A few individual characteristics of the separate grains will help in planning a mixed ration. Oats are easily and safely digested. They have a "hull" that provides some bulk. Oats are high energy. Barley (always fed rolled) is a better protein source and is not as high in calories—energy—as oats are. Barley might

be better for an excitable horse. Corn is considered a hot feed because it delivers energy from its high oil content, helps put weight on a horse, and has very little bulk. Corn is heavy and rich and can easily be overfed. Rolled milo is a good feed for putting on weight without as high a risk as corn.

Dampening any feed will add to its digestibility and all feeds should be offered in some kind of container to prevent waste and keep foreign materials from being eaten.

In cold weather, digestion helps keep a horse warm, so feeding extra hay will help the horse through the cold much more efficiently than extra grain. Adding grain will add energy without helping heat the body at all.

These last items are the most important factors in the diet of the southwestern horse: water and salt.

Without clean water always available, no ration will be properly digested and the horse's cooling system and waste elimination will be impaired, often to the point of shutdown resulting in death. Water can be kept fresher in large tanks with the occasional addition of a few drops of bluing. This disinfects the water and helps control algae safely.

Salt must be provided free-choice, year-round, just like water. Salt makes the body retain moisture, preventing dehydration, and aids in the breaking down of nutrients and the filtering of wastes. It is a necessity.

Experimentation with rations will often yield surprising results. The addition of live yeast (a B vitamin supplement, the water-soluble ones that are not stored in the body) might help to calm a horse naturally and the addition of corn oil (½ cup daily) can add weight and energy without excitement.

A properly fed horse is a better partner because he is more efficient, will live longer, and has a better attitude. 🐾