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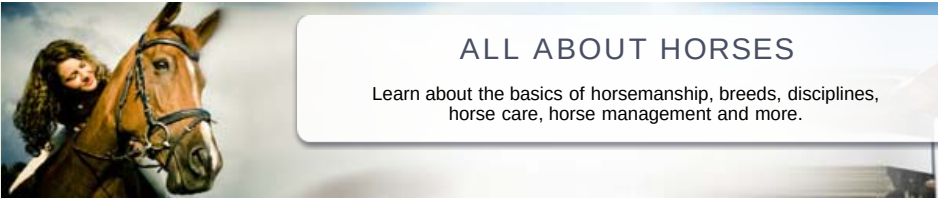
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Buying Prepared Horse Feed

By: Karen Briggs for Horse & Rider Magazine

1. Prepare to pay. When it comes to prepared grain rations, buy the best you can afford. Here's why.

Inexpensive grain mixes are more likely to be formulated with only a basic "pre-mix" (what feed manufacturers call the vitamin/mineral supplement they add to the grain combination). Premium feeds are more likely to be specifically formulated for your type of horse, with minerals designed for optimum digestibility. Chances are you won't have to supplement it pellets or powders.

Each grain type used in a high-priced feed will contain fewer foreign particles than cheap feeds, giving you more bang for your buck.

Cheap grain mixes are often mixed according to a "least-cost" formulation. Their nutritional profile remains similar from bag to bag, but the company may change the formula, or substitute ingredients according to fluctuations in the grain market. This can be a problem if you have a horse with allergies or sensitivities to certain ingredients. By contrast, the cost of premium feeds may change, but the ingredients remain exactly the same.

2. Figure out the formulation. Sweet feed, pellets, or extruded feed? Here's a guide.

Sweet feeds are highly palatable to your horse. And, they allow you to see individual grains to inspect quality.

Pellets and extruded feeds are usually highly digestible, because the grains have been ground up into small particles--and a horse with fussy eating habits can't sort ingredients (that is, leave what he doesn't care for in the bottom of the feed tub).

Pellets are a good choice if your horse has dental problems (especially the very young and very old), because you can soak them to create a soft, easy-to-chew mush.

Extruded feeds are cooked, which makes certain nutrients highly digestible. And, their large "kibble" format encourages thorough chewing, which slows down a horse that bolts his feed. But the extruded format also takes up more space, so you get less food value per bag than with sweet feeds or pellets.

3. Check tags. Be careful of the expression "complete feed," as it means different things to different feed companies.

Some manufacturers use the phrase to describe any mixed-grain ration designed to deliver "complete" nutrition when paired with good-quality hay.

Others label feeds "complete" when they incorporate high levels of fiber in the mix. Such feeds are designed to provide 100 percent nutrition--no other forage sources required.

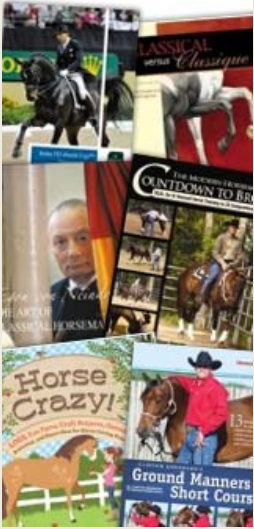
Check the feed tag to tell the difference; for example, if the forage content is only 10 or 15 percent, it's not designed to replace hay.

3. Beware of goo. When inspecting a sweet feed, keep in mind molasses can hide a multitude of sins. If the whole ration is black and sticky, chances are, the grains underneath the goo are of poor quality, or dusty. Your best bet is to buy grain with a light lacing of molasses that enhances--rather than disguises--other ingredients. A light-molasses feed also won't set like cement in cold weather.

■ Karen Briggs is the author of *Understanding Equine Nutrition* (Eclipse Press), and the former Horse Feed Specialist for United Cooperatives, a large Canadian feed company. Based in Ontario, she's a regular contributor to more than 25 equine magazines throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. She's also a Canadian Equestrian Federation certified riding coach, and an active competitor in three-day eventing.



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