

Feeding Your Horse with a Slow Feeder

By Katherine Blocksdorf

Hay is often a horse owner's biggest expense. With prices in the double digits for small square bales and over one hundred dollars for large rounds in some places, it's painful to watch horses pull their hay rations apart and trample it into the ground. Feeders and mangers help, but many horses root through even small amounts of hay, looking for the most tender grasses and toss the leftovers on the

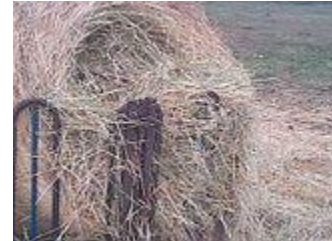
ground or stall floor. Once it's on the ground and a bit soiled, the horses will not eat it. Not only will the hay get wasted, once the horse has pushed aside what it doesn't like, it will stand bored—or chew fences or stall walls in an effort to satisfy their need to graze.

Hay nets aren't really the answer, because they're fine for short term feeding, such as when you're camping with your horse, or at a show, they're not good for feeding long term. It's much healthier for a horse to eat in a head-down position, and hay bags, to be safe, must be tied at head height. Sagging hay nets—whether small 'slow feed' netting or larger, traditional knotted nets are a real danger, because it's easy for horses to become entangled in them.

Slowing Eating

Many horses will eat and eat and eat...until they are obese, and nothing but the food running out completely slows them down. While small multiple feedings are the best way to regulate food, this isn't always possible if you can't be home to dole out rations to your horses all day. Left to eat a round bale, many horses, like my own, won't stop eating until the bale is gone and their bellies are the size of the bale.

In answer to these problems, many people are experimenting with 'slow feeders'. Slow feeders restrict the amount of hay the horses can pull off of a bale or portion of hay, preventing them from gorging themselves and ripping bales and flakes apart to trample the unwanted bits into the ground. Horses won't be tempted to eat soiled hay from the ground, which could reduce the risk of sand colic.



Round bales can quickly turn into a mess as horses root for the best bits.



Hay contained in a slow feeder prevents horse from devouring bales too quickly and making a mess.



How Slow Feeders Work

Either wire or string mesh is used to cover the bale so the horses can't get their noses right into the hay. Because they can only pick out the hay they can reach through the mesh, they are more inclined to eat what they've pulled off. They can't root through the hay looking for the most delectable bits, so they can't toss the rest on the ground. It takes longer for horses to eat, so the need to graze steadily is satisfied. We've noticed that the horses that were inclined to overeat on a round bale actually lose a bit of weight without having to be kept completely away from the bale.



Slow feeders can be built to accommodate a few flakes of hay from a small square bale, one or more small bales, or large round bales. My mother decided to try covering large round bales with string sport netting. The netting has 1 1/2 inch square openings and is safely attached by a system she created to secure it to a metal 'tombstone' style round bale feeder. She has also built square wooden boxes that work similar to the metal feeders. After six months of use, the nets have only been minimally damaged. Problems like securely anchoring the net, and preventing them from freezing if they sag to the ground in winter have been solved. Many people use metal mesh set into wooden boxes and there are a variety of ways this can be done.



Safety First

Whether you use sport or fish net, or metal wire mesh, your first priority in designing your own slow feeder is safety. Any materials you use must have spaces that heads or hooves cannot go through. Netting should not touch the ground where a horse wearing shoes could hook the back of the shoe through the net or mesh. I don't like horses turned out with halters, but if they must be, watch the snaps or buckles don't get caught in the net or mesh. Horses do climb into bale feeders, so be sure that any boxes you build have



high enough sides that a horse won't simply step into it.

Make sure you haven't left any sharp edges on bins or boxes and there are no projecting sharp posts. Don't use spring clips or carabiner snaps that a horse could push its halter against and get caught (or catch an ear or eyelid). Make sure you repair any rips promptly, so that horses don't push through them and get their heads caught. Some horses are genius at finding gaps to 'cheat' through, so be sure to check your nets frequently.

