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ALFALFA AND SWEETCLOVER SILAGE

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Alfalfa And Sweetclover Silage

The first crop of alfalfa is often damaged by rain. Such damaged alfalfa can be expected to have lost much of its protein and carotin. It thus is very low in feeding value. Each year the list of farmers who are putting the first cutting of alfalfa in the silo continues to grow longer. Not only does this method of handling preserve the important feed elements, but at the same time it maintains high palatability. Many dairymen can testify to the value of alfalfa silage in stepping up milk production during the winter and early spring months when pastures are not available. In fact, good alfalfa silage is superior in some respects to many pastures.

When considering the advisability of making alfalfa silage it is well to recognise that the first cutting of alfalfa is often about half the entire crop. It is well to keep in mind also that even in the best of haying weather, alfalfa, cured as hay, often loses a high percentage of its leaves. These leaves carry about 75% of the total protein and carotin present in the green alfalfa.

At one time it was considered necessary to use a preservative in making alfalfa silage. This is still a good practice. More recently, however, it has been found that the problem is one of moisture content. If the alfalfa is permitted to wilt slightly before it is ensiled, good silage can be made without a preservative. It is extremely important, however, that the alfalfa is not permitted to dry. It must contain enough moisture (about 65-68%) to permit it to pack tightly in the silo. Dry material will not pack well and thus will mold.

What has been said about alfalfa applies equally well to sweetclover, except that it is doubly important that sweetclover silage is not subject to molding. Moldy sweetclover silage or hay may cause bleeding disease in cattle when fed continuously. If the sweetclover silage is kept reasonably free of mold and if it is fed alternately with other feeds, there is little danger of livestock losses. This danger is not encountered

with alfalfa silage. It is suggested that sweetclover be ensiled at the early bud stage. Normally it carries less moisture than alfalfa and thus requires less wilting. Under some conditions it may need little or no drying and may be ensiled directly from the mower or field chopper.

When alfalfa or sweetclover carries a high moisture content, and when it is to be ensiled directly from the mower it is important that dry material of some kind be added to the ensilage material to absorb some of the excess water, otherwise, the proper type of fermentation will not take place and the silage will be ill-smelling and unpalatable. In upright silos this excess water may cause the silo to burst. Chopped dry corn or sorghum fodder, or ground ear corn are often used for this purpose. The ground ear corn is used at the rate of 200 pounds for each ton of green material. When fodder is used it must be kept in mind that if too much is used the entire mass may be too dry and thus, will not pack well. Close packing is essential if molding is to be avoided. Silage is said to carry the proper amount of water when a ball of it pressed between the hands tends to cling together. If it falls apart easily it is too dry.