



Because small herbivores such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas evolved as grass grazers and browsers, they need hay to maintain healthy digestive systems and wear down their teeth.

Hay Products for Pocket Pets

Whether it's loose, baled or added to treats, hay provides vital nutrients and promotes healthy behavior among small herbivores. By Lisa Plummer

Hay isn't just for horses—it's also for bunnies, guinea pigs, chinchillas and small rodents. A good source of long-strand fiber as well as protein, calcium and minerals, hay is an important part of a healthy, balanced diet for small herbivores. It also enriches their environment, encouraging natural foraging and burrowing behaviors that can prevent boredom and obesity.

By nature, small herbivores such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas are grass grazers and browsers. They evolved to thrive on a constant supply of high-fiber, lower-protein food. The long-strand fiber in hay helps keep their digestive systems healthy and helps wear down their teeth.

"Feeding hay to an herbivore is not an option, it is a necessity," said Dr. Micah Kohles, director of technical services at Oxbow Animal Health (Murdock, Neb.). "A high-quality grass hay should be available at all times. Herbivores need a diet high in fiber and low in carbohydrates to prevent diarrhea and other digestive complications."

In fact, about 75 percent of a herbivore's

diet should consist of hay fed on a free-choice basis, according to Melissa Ross, marketing operations manager for Oxbow Animal Health.

"In addition to preventing boredom, feeding a variety of hay enriches a small animal's diet, assists in dental maintenance and promotes healthy eating behaviors," Ross said. "Most grass hays have similar nutrients and can be used interchangeably while offering different flavors, colors and textures."

Although hay is not a dietary staple for omnivores such as hamsters, gerbils, mice and rats, it helps satisfy their nesting, warmth and tactile needs, Ross added.

Added vegetables, herbs and other ingredients can enhance the taste, texture or digestibility of loose hay. Kaytee's Timothy Hay Plus line, for example, includes carrot, marigold and mint.

Let's look at some hay products so you'll have a better idea what to recommend to your customers.

Hay Au Naturel

Quality and freshness are crucial considerations for timothy hay in loose form, according to Diane Vair, product marketing manager for Marshall Ferrets and Pet Products (Wolcott, N.Y.), which makes Peter's Premium Rabbit Products. "[Retailers and consumers] should look for a fresh smell, green color and no moisture or condensation, because moisture leads to mold and that can introduce problems," she said.

To ensure freshness, Marshall uses packages with aeration holes for Peter's Premium All-Natural Western Cut Timothy Hay. They let moisture escape and keep the sun-cured, preservative-free contents dry, Vair said. The packages also carry expiration dates.

Ingredient sourcing is the key to quality for many companies, including Kaytee Products Inc. (Chilton, Wis.), a division of Central Garden & Pet. Its Timothy Hay Plus line uses timothy harvested from high elevations of the Columbia River basin, an ideal environment with dry days and cool nights, according to Karena Dyer, small-animal associate marketing manager.

"Our experts, who have been farming since the 1920s, hand-select the hay from the second cutting to ensure the proper ration of leaf to stem," Dyer said. "Once selected, our hay is sheltered to protect it from the elements and ensure that the right green color and nutritional content is maintained."

Similarly, fragrant seasonal herbs, including chamomile, lemon verbena, lavender and red clover blossoms, add aroma and flavor to the timothy hay





Mini hay bales, including four varieties from American Pet Diner, are neater and less wasteful than loose hay.

in Botanical Hay from Oxbow Animal Health (Murdock, Neb.).

“Our Botanical Hay is a great choice when pet owners want to add some variety in their pet’s diet,” Ross said. “Pet owners can alternate or mix in Botanical Hay with other Oxbow grass hays to create appetizing, long-strand fiber meals.”

Oxbow offers several other loose grass hay varieties, including Western Timothy, Oat, Orchard Grass, Organic Meadow and Alfalfa Hay.

In fact, John Miller, Oxbow’s president and founder, was the first to market timothy hay as a staple food for small animals, according to Ross.

“Based on years of growing experience and knowledge, as well as relationships with industry-leading veterinarians, Mr. Miller knew timothy to be the ideal long-strand fiber source for keeping small-animal digestive tracts functioning properly,” Ross said. “Previous diets had been based on feeding alfalfa hay, which contain more concentrated amounts of protein and calcium than required in the diets of adult animals.”

Hay Bales and Cubes

Picture large hay bales fed to livestock, then shrink them down. Enter the mini hay bale, sized just right for critters.

American Pet Diner (Eureka, Nev.) offers a wide variety of mini bales, including Timothy Gold Hay; Timothy High Fiber Hay, which contains coarser stems and more seed heads; 3 Way Grain Hay with added seasonal grains, including oat, wheat and barley; Mountain Grass Hay, with various seasonal hays including timothy, alfalfa and orchard grass; and Alffy Alfalfa Hay. The company also offers The Real Bale Timothy

Gold Hay, larger-sized bales tied with real bale string.

Growing quality hay on the family farm has been a labor of love for over 13 years, according to Lisa Marshall, president and chief executive officer of American Pet Diner.

“All of [our] hay is grown in the high desert of Diamond Valley in Eureka, Nev., where we have cool nights and warm days, letting the hay grow slowly so it can provide the optimum nutrient content and palatability,” Marshall said. “We choose only the ‘best of the best’ hay.”

Mini hay bales are neater and less wasteful than loose hay, according to Sue Brown, senior vice president of F.M. Brown’s Sons Inc. (Sinking Spring, Pa.). That’s why Brown’s developed Falfa Cravins Timothy Hay and Falfa Cravins pre-sliced Alfalfa Hay Bales. The hay is double-compressed, preventing it from oxidizing and losing nutritional value, so it stays fresher longer.

“Once the tie strings are cut, each portion comes apart neatly and easily for feeding,” Brown said. “Plus, each layer is sized right for hay mangers in small-animal cages. This means that our hay is more economical to feed than standard hay bales.”

tip

A balanced diet for small herbivores includes leafy lettuces and greens, hay, hay pellets and herbs.

Oxbow’s Hay Cakes are another neat alternative. The convenient compressed cubes are made of fresh, preservative- and additive-free timothy hay with the same long-strand fiber and nutritional benefits of loose or baled hay. They also give critters a good dental workout.

Greens and Nibbles

Hay also is the foundation of several snacks and treats that add extra variety to herbivores’ diets.

A virtual salad in a bag, Meadow Mix from Peter’s Premium Rabbit Products contains several high-quality grasses and a variety of broadleaf plants cut during the active growing stage to provide maximum nutrition. Free of preservatives, additives and pesticides, this fiber-filled mix mimics the plants rabbits would graze on in the wild.

For a sweeter treat, Peter’s Rabbit Salad Bowl combines timothy hay and fruit salad with apples and cranberries in a natural woven grass bowl that is safe to chew.

F.M. Brown’s offers its fair share of timothy hay treats and salads for critters. For example, Timothy Hay Yogurt Yummies are timothy hay pellets coated with a creamy yogurt. Timothy Hay Side Salads are available in two varieties: Garden Goodness is a blend of fresh timothy hay and dried garden veggies; and Fruits n’ Berries is a mix of timothy hay and a variety of wild berries.

Hay Play

Why just eat hay when you can play with it, too? Several companies have taken hay to the next level by making bungalows, loungers and tunnels out of it. Small animals can rest, sleep, hide and play inside them—and nibble on them safely.

Oxbow’s Timothy Club bungalows, loungers and tunnels are hand-woven of 100 percent timothy hay. They are constructed without wire or string, and don’t include chemicals, so they are completely edible, Ross said.

Falfa Cravins Herbs n’ Hay Edible Tunnels from F.M. Brown’s are fun hide-aways that double as tasty snacks. Available in an 8-inch size for rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas and a 5-inch size for small rodents, the grass tunnels promote animals’ natural chewing instinct and provide mental stimulation, Brown said.



Hay-based treats and salads range from Timothy Hay Yogurt Yummies from F.M. Brown's to Peter's Premium Meadow Mix from Marshall Ferrets and Pet Products.

Marketing and Selling Hay Products

The simplest way to market hay products is to use them in store habitats, manufacturers agree. Whether they're foraging, tunneling through mounds of loose hay, hiding or playing in natural grass hay loungers, or munching on hay snacks and treats, critters will do the advertising for you by demonstrating product uses.

"If the store sells or adopts [small] animals, the best way to promote hay sales is to have hay available to the animals at all times in the feeders," Ross said. "Any time the customer sees the store feeding a large amount of hay, it translates to higher sales of hay products."

Whether in long-stem form, compressed into bales, molded into cakes or integrated into dietary supplements and treats, hay products are an important component of a balanced herbivore diet.



Oxbow's Timothy Bungalow, hand-woven of 100 percent timothy hay, is completely edible.

Conveying the similarities, differences and various benefits of hay products to your customers is the key to selling them successfully—and to ensuring healthy diets for their small pets. ■

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The Lowdown on Common Types of Hay

HAY IS A harvested plant that is cut at various times during the growth cycle, depending on the type, then dried and cured. In most cases, hay is cut during its late bud or early bloom phase. Most of the protein in hay is found in the leaves and seed heads, while the stalks are richer in fiber.

Hay comprises two basic types: grasses and legumes. Grass hays are high in fiber, and low in protein and calcium, so they are suitable for small adult herbivores. Most grass hays contain similar nutrients but offer different flavors, colors and textures; they can be used interchangeably. Legume hays are richer and higher in protein and calcium, so they are best for young, pregnant, nursing and convalescing animals, or as a treat for adults.

Here are the most commonly fed hay varieties for small animals:

- **Alfalfa.** Rich-smelling and flavorful, alfalfa is a legume hay high in fiber, protein, calcium and energy. It is a good source of phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, sulfur, iron, zinc and selenium, but is not intended as a base hay for adult animals. It comes from a stalky plant with brittle, crumbly, flat

leaves that look more like leafed clover than grass.

- **Brome.** A grass hay similar to timothy, brome is leafier and has wider blades as well as a slightly different flavor and aroma. It can be mixed with other hays for variety and to encourage finicky critters to nibble.

- **Oat.** Oat hay has the same nutritional qualities as other grass hays but a crunchier consistency. With golden strands that resemble straw, oat has a savory flavor that can help encourage picky eaters. It adds variety and texture and makes a good rotational hay.

- **Orchard Grass.** A green, fruity-smelling grass hay, orchard grass also is similar to timothy but contains slightly less protein and fiber. A cool-season grass with flat leaf blades that vary from green to bluish-green, it can be used as an alternative base hay for critters that won't eat timothy.

- **Western Timothy.** Often used as the "base" hay in diets for small herbivores, timothy is the most commonly grown variety in North America. It resembles flat, dried blades of grass, with colors ranging from soft green to gray/brown green.

—Lisa Plummer

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