

Beet Pulp Safety Warning (aka the famous squirrel story)

People that are into equine nutrition are notorious for spending their time doing the oddest things. While everyone else has normal nightmares about finding themselves riding in the World Equestrian Games stark naked past the press corps, nutrition people fret over whether their carefully thought-out recommendations will make the difference between Muffy the Superhorse winning his next competition in fame and glory, or falling into a dead faint somewhere between being saddled and the starting line. In the end, the finer points of nutrition often make zero difference, however, because you generally find out that:

a) Muffy won't even touch your carefully crafted ration, much preferring to eat his bedding, the vet's fingers and anything from the Taco Bell menu;

b) the moment you finish calculating the Perfect Equine Ration featuring Aunt Tilly's Super Horsey Yums Yums, the feed company goes out of business or is indicted on environmental pollution charges;

c) it's all irrelevant, anyway, because the barn manager's favorite phrase is "Well, we've always fed this way for sixty years and hardly ever lose more than a horse a month to colic", and steadfastly refuses to feed anything at all other than His Very Own Secret Recipe, featuring lawn clippings, glazed doughnuts and something that smells a lot like latex.

However, every now and then, you stumble across a feed that horses actually like (at least, after that initial suspicious, "You're trying to poison me, aren't you?" look), is wonderfully nutritious, cheap to feed and still Obscure and Mysterious enough that people feel like they're really on The Cutting Edge in feeding it to Muffy. Beet pulp is like that, and for a long time I thought the only disadvantage to it was the minor inconvenience of having to soak it before feeding. Some folks skip that part, but others revel in making sure everyone else in the barn knows just how conscientious and detail-minded they are about Muffy's nutritional well-being.

However, eventually I knew the true downside to beet pulp would show up, and thought it only fair that I pass it along...

This afternoon I decided to bring some beet pulp pellets into the house to soak, because I wanted to get an idea of exactly how much they expanded in volume during the soaking process. Academic types are like that, pathetically easy to amuse and desperately in need of professional help. I knew they expanded quite a bit, because the first time I'd innocently added water to a five-pound bucket of beet pulp, I'd come back later to find my feed room practically awash in beet pulp, providing a breakfast that every horse within a five mile radius still remembers with fond nostalgia. So in the interest of scientific curiosity, I trundled in a bucket, about three pounds of beet pulp, added in the water and set it in the living room to do its thing. No problem. Research in action.

Well, in our ongoing quest to turn this house into Noah's Ark, we have not only four horses, three dogs, four neurotic cats, a sulfur-crested cockatoo, a cockatiel and assorted toads, we also have William. William is a fox squirrel who absent-mindedly fell out of his tree as a blind and

hairless baby two years ago and whom the vet promptly handed off to the only person he knew silly enough to traipse around with a baby squirrel and a bottle of Esbilac into her bookbag. Actually, the trick wasn't in keeping such a tiny creature warm, fed and clean---it was keeping a straight face and looking as mystified as everyone else when William woke up hungry and started pipping for his bottled like a very small, slightly muffled alarm clock. Invariably, this usually occurred while I was standing in line at the post office, picking up a pizza for dinner or on one memorable occasion, taking a final exam in biochemistry. Being no dummy, William knew a sucker when he saw one and has happily been an Urban Squirrel ever since.

And for those of you that think A Squirrel's Place is In The Wild, don't think we didn't try that...his first Christmas, we thought we'd give him his first lesson in Being a Wild Squirrel by letting him play in the undecorated Christmas tree. His reaction was to shriek in horror, scutter frantically across the floor and go try to hide underneath the nearest border collie. Since then, the only way he will allow himself to be taken outside is hiding inside Mummy's shirt and peering suspiciously out at the sinister world.



So much for the re-make of Born Free in San Dimas. So secure is he about his place in the world that on more than one occasion, I've caught him sitting on his fat, smug little bottom, making faces out the window at our neighborhood (very frustrated) red-tailed hawk---like as not clutching a cashew in one paw and a bit of mango in the other.

Anyway, when I set out the bucket of beet pulp, I may have underestimated the lengths that a young and enthusiastic squirrel will go to to stash all available food items in new and unusual hiding spots. I thought letting William out of his cage as usual and giving him a handful of almonds to go happily cram under cushions and into sleeping dog's ears was sufficient entertainment for the afternoon. After all, when I left, he was gleefully chortling and gloating over his pile of treasure, making sure the cockatoo saw them so he could tell her I Have Almonds And You Don't. So much for blind optimism.



Apparently when the almond supply ran out, beet pulp pellets became fair game and I can only imagine the little rat finding that great big bucket and swooning with the possibilities of being able to hide away All That Food. The problem isn't quite so much that I now have three pounds of beet pulp pellets cleverly tucked away in every corner of my house, it's that as far as I can tell, the soaking-expanding-and-falling-apart process seems to be kinda like nuclear meltdown. Once the reaction gets started, no force on earth is going to stop it.

So when I come back from the grocery store, not only do I find an exhausted but incredibly Fulfilled squirrel sprawled out snoozing happily up on the cat tree, I find that my house smells a lot like a Jamaican feed mill and virtually every orifice is crammed full of beet pulp. This includes the bathroom sink drain, the fish tank filter, in my undie drawer, in the kitty box (much to their horror) and ALL the pockets of my bookbag. Not to mention that in enthusiastically stuffing beet pulp into the air holes of the little box that hold live crickets for the toad's dinner,

William managed to open it up and free several hundred crickets into the living room. It's not that I mind crickets springing to and fro, it's just that it sounds a lot like an Evening in the Amazon Rain Forest in here. The cats, on the other hand, have never had such a marvelous time steeplechasing after stray crickets back and forth over the furniture, crunching up the spoils of the hunt (which wouldn't be so bad if they would just chew with their mouths closed), and sicking up the more indigestible parts onto the rug.

I simply can't WAIT to turn on the furnace and find out what toasting beet pulp smells like.

The good news is that in case of siege, I have enough carbohydrates hidden in my walls and under the furniture to survive for years. The bad news is that as soon as I try to remove any of this stash, I get a hysterical squirrel clinging to my pant leg, tearfully shrieking that I'm ruining all his hard work and now he's going to starve this winter. (This is despite the fact that William is spoiled utterly rotten, knows how to open the macademia nut can all by himself and has enough of a tummy to have earned him the unfortunate nickname Buddha Belly.)

So in case anyone was losing sleep wondering just how much final product you get after soaking three pounds of beet pulp, the answer is a living room full. I'd write this new data up and submit it as a case study paper to the nutrition and physiology society, but I suspect the practical applications may be limited.

Off to go empty the Shop-Vac. Again.

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