



Canola as a Forage Crop

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With the recent rains one of the things being reported is a significant growth of volunteer canola that is starting to flower. I'm not sure why we are seeing early volunteer growth but it may be in part due to the very dry hot conditions in some fields during July that lead to plants dying back early and pods shattering. The rain in early August combined with warm temperature likely lead to the re-growth that we are seeing now.

In cases where the re-growth has advanced enough there is potential to take that growth as feed. Canola hay is similar to good quality alfalfa grass when it's cut in the late-bloom to mid-podded stage.

Canola hay or silage can be a good feed, but producers should be cautious, limiting its inclusion to 40-60 per cent of the total ration on a dry-matter basis. Forage canola should be introduced slowly into a cattle's diet over a period of days as it may take one or two days for cattle to become accustomed to the taste and also to reduce the incidence of digestive upset and/or bloat.

If you are taking canola as hay the plants may take four to six days to dry down to proper moisture levels for baling (16 to 18 per cent moisture content). Crimping the hay ensures faster and more uniform drying. Canola tends to turn dark as it cures, but this does not seem to affect palatability. Note that canola taken near maturity may have a feed value similar to straw and cattle do not find it palatable.

As we move to shorter cooler days, getting canola to dry down may become more difficult. Taking canola as silage might be a better choice. It should be noted that canola is high in moisture (75 per cent to 80 per cent) and it will take time to wilt down to 65 per cent moisture. Crimping will hasten the drying process. There may be seepage and ensiling problems if they are ensiled at moisture contents greater than 70 per cent. Some producers have had good results by filling the silage pit with alternating layers of canola and cereals cut for silage. This helps to reduce seepage problems and offers the opportunity to mix the layers when feeding the silage. The addition of bacterial silage inoculants may be beneficial when ensiling these crops, which are low in soluble carbohydrates.

Canola contains high levels of sulphur and therefore there are limits on how much and for how long it should be fed. You can go to the links below to get more information on feeding recommendations from both the Saskatchewan and Manitoba factsheets.

Additional resources

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/agriculture-natural-resources-and-industry/agribusiness-farmers-and-ranchers/livestock/pastures-grazing-hay-silage/brassica-crops-for-hay-and-silage>

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/production/beef/canola-as-a-forage-crop.html#:~:text=Surprisingly%2C%20canola%20can%20make%20nutritious%20and%20palatable%20hay%20or%20silage.&text=Producers%20have%20reported%20that%20cattle,seepage%20and%20other%20ensiling%20problems.>