

An Offbeat Way To Make Good Hay

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An intrepid new garden farmer has been asking me lately about the details of making hay. I can tell by his questions that he is very intelligent but has never experienced the culture of the hay field. Until now, it had never occurred to me how difficult the situation has to be for him. I was unceremoniously handed a hay fork about seventy years ago, and in a sense never let go. What I know I could never have learned on my own in a short time, no matter how much instruction was available from the printed word. Only by working in the shadow of father and two grandfathers did I learn, sort of by cultural osmosis. But what makes the whole business so enormously difficult is realizing that even after all that, I still don't know much. Haymaking is mostly art and just a wee bit of science thrown in to make it look, pardon the

pun, cut and dried.

I just finished making some hay in a way that most farmers would describe as "strange." I've made hay this way now for three years in a row with excellent results so I'm not afraid to pass the idea along even if it is a little offbeat. To appreciate it, however, you need to remember how hay is made these days. A very expensive disk-type mower now cuts hay at twelve miles mph or faster, squishes the moisture out of the hay stems in a very expensive attached crimper, and lays the squished hay in a fluffy windrow, all in one operation. A few hours later, another expensive machine, called a tedder, fluffs the drying hay up again, so that it dries even faster. Then, usually two days after mowing, a tractor pulling one of the latest very expensive new balers speeds down the windrow spitting out bales faster than a kid spitting out seeds from a slice of watermelon. If the hay is still not quite dry, the baler senses the fact and automatically sprays a very expensive liquid on each bale that almost magically keeps the hay from molding as it finishes drying in the bale. All this is wonderful technology, but if you can't sell the bales, standard sized, for four dollars a bale or so, you are losing money.

Until three years ago, I believed that we small-time folk, being unable financially to buy the new haymaking equipment, had to use a sickle bar mower to cut hay. When my old sickle bar mower decided to die on me, in desperation I cut the hay with my ancient rotary mower. I had hitherto balked at that idea because the rotary shreds the hay too finely, or so I thought, to be windrowed with my old side delivery rake. And besides, I thought, finely-chopped hay was too hard to handle, even with a hand hay fork. And besides, my old coot of a rotary mower would have a hard time mowing a heavy stand of red clover, my preferred hay forage.

It so happened, however, that the hay I intended to cut was a stand of Alice white clover, which is a much daintier plant than red clover, and is, in fact, not recommended for hay but for pasture. It does not yield enough tonnage to satisfy the demands of commercial haymaking. But my old bones did not want to make a whole bunch of hay in one cutting anyway. My aim was quality, not quantity. So I mowed it, or more correctly, I shredded it, with my rotary about eleven o'clock in the morning after the dew was gone. The mower threw the chopped hay out the side of it in a fine layer. To my surprise, that clover was dry enough to bring in the very next day. It dried fast because there was not much bulk there anyway and it did not have those heavier stems of red clover or alfalfa (which the animals don't much like anyway) that dry only slowly unless run through a crimper. My ancient hayrake could rake the chopped clover fairly

well, all things considered, rolling three mower swaths into one windrow. By about three o'clock the next afternoon - hardly twenty four hours from mowing - I could hand-fork it from windrow to pickup truck, using a bigger fodder fork rather than a hay fork, haul it to the stack and pile it up - finished before the sun went down. If the hay wasn't always perfectly dry, it could finish curing in the stack better than in a bale. This clover was exposed to only a very minimum amount of sunlight and only one night of dew to harm it. Being of highest quality, it is equal to twice the amount of only average hay so even though I am making only a small amount at one time, it is more than meets the eye.

This method will work for red clover or alfalfa too if the growth is on the sparse side, as is the case when I renew a stand by broadcast-seeding into the old clover sod. Often the new seeding will not be heavy - not "good" enough by commercial standards but just right for my sheep.

The moral of the story is that what is the "right" way by commercial standards can be the "wrong" way for a garden farmer.