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Following is an overview of feeding considerations for urban prairie dogs. While we do not advocate feeding wild animals, the lack of sufficient native vegetation at urban sites or drought conditions may prevent the resident prairie dogs from getting sufficient nourishment from their environment. In these cases supplemental feeding should be considered.

Recommended foods:

Timothy Hay
Apples pieces (quarters or eighths)

Carrots (1/2-1" pieces)
Black Oil Sunflower Seeds

Suitable foods:

Green Leafy Vegetables
Kale
Lettuce (quarters or eighths)
Spinach
Peanuts in shells (not salted)
Alfalfa or Grass Hay

Fruits:
Peaches (cut up)
Grapes
Melons (cut up)
Corn on the Cob (no husk)
Fresh Cut Lawn Grass

Unsuitable foods:

Meat or Fish
Bread
Cookies

Cheese
Cakes
Candy

Prairie dogs also like flowers, but they don't like citrus, broccoli, zucchini or potatoes. Non-salt protein and seed feed blocks for cattle and birds may or may not be eaten by prairie dogs (depending on the availability of other forage). Some prairie dogs like alfalfa and grass based horse feed pellets. Smaller feed pellets are preferred as the larger ones are too big for them to eat easily.

Alfalfa hay is not suitable for young prairie dogs and in certain conditions can cause a serious and fatal condition in older prairie dogs. It is recommended that timothy or grass hay be used for feeding.

Some local grocers will provide produce that would otherwise be thrown out. While much of the produce can be used, if it is too spoiled for human consumption it is likely too spoiled for prairie dogs as well.

Grass cuttings that have been fertilized or sprayed with herbicides or pesticides are not suitable for prairie dogs.

Seasonal Considerations and Hydration:

February to April

Under normal conditions prairie dogs will emerge from their winter hibernation during March when the weather becomes warmer and the days longer. During mild winters the prairie dogs may emerge earlier and either stay up or return to hibernation depending on the weather and temperature. After emerging from hibernation, prairie dogs require nourishment and hydration. If they can obtain these through natural vegetation from their habitat they will be stronger throughout the season and be capable of producing

healthy offspring. If suitable natural vegetation is not available supplemental food and hydration (shallow dishes filled with water) may be necessary. Frequency: Once a week.

May and June

At this time the focus should be on protein: sunflower seeds and protein blocks. Pregnant and lactating females need lots of strength, as do the newborn juveniles. Alfalfa hay must not be fed once the juveniles have emerged from the burrows. Alfalfa will cause intestinal hemorrhaging leading to their death. Alfalfa can also cause a fatal condition in adults under certain circumstances. While not recommended Alfalfa can be used later in the season after the juveniles have matured. Processed and peeled baby carrots should not be used for small prairie dogs as they can become lodged in their throats and cause choking. Frequency: Twice a week.

July and August

This is the time of the year when Gunnison's consume three times more than at any time of the year to plump up for their hibernation. The best advice is to feed them abundantly and frequently. The juveniles mature in about 3 months so they will require a steady diet as well. Frequency: Every three to four days.

September and October

This begins the period when their activity level begins to decline. You will notice that less and less food is being consumed and fewer numbers of prairie dogs are out and about. This is the time of the year to concentrate on hay and grass. The prairie dogs will need large amounts of nesting material to stay warm in their burrows and to nibble on throughout the winter months. Feeding of alfalfa is fine as it provides high protein calories for the winter months.

Basic Recommendations

To prevent produce from drying or rotting and birds from eating the seed, food should be placed into the burrows whenever possible. You will get a feel for which burrows are active (food disappears) and you can concentrate on these. Water is encouraged, especially right after hibernation and during periods of drought. In some areas, stress due to urban crowding, prairie dogs can become easily dehydrated. Their metabolism, however, is geared to getting moisture from their fresh green food sources. Feeding of apples, carrots, and other moist produce is often sufficient for providing water.

In the wild, Gunnison's are pure "desert" dogs, getting their nourishment and water from native grasses and other growth such as sagebrush, snake weed, goat heads and prickly pear cactus. An occasional insect provides protein.

Prairie dogs can literally wait weeks between meals and even longer for moisture, but if food is available, they will eat often. Therefore we should consider feeding them with balance in mind. We do not want them to feel starvation or want for food and water in urban areas where there is no natural food. We also want to be responsible stewards and not feed so heavily that food is left uneaten, causes the prairie dogs to become obese, or stimulates birth rate. Fat prairie dogs are not necessarily healthy and happy prairie dogs. Feeding every 3-7 days is adequate for most colonies and conditions. The colonies just north of Indian School on Tramway are fed frequently by visitors and are examples of excess.

Sources for Timothy, Alfalfa, Grass hay, and Seeds

Horseman's Feed and Supply – 9700 2nd St. NW
Dan's Feed and Supply – 6903 4th St. NW
Town and Country Feed – 15600 Central Ave SE (Old Rt. 66)
Western Mercantile Old Rt. 66, Tijeras
Edgewood Feed and Supply – Old Route 66, Edgewood
Broome's Feed and Supply – Highway 41 S. Moriarity

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