

Blister Beetles

Late summer is the time of year when alfalfa hay is prone to infestation by the blister beetle.

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By Cindy Hale

Late summer is the time of year when alfalfa hay is prone to infestation by the blister beetle. There are many varieties of beetles that contain a chemical known as cantharidin, which is corrosive to the skin and toxic when eaten. Any alfalfa grown in arid regions of the United States is susceptible to swarms of the nasty critters. The mature blister beetle is approximately one-inch in length, and is always dark in color. It may also have stripes atop its back. The antennae are noticeable, being almost one-third the length of the beetle's body. The beetles often follow a grasshopper invasion, as its larva feed on the egg pods of grasshoppers. Later, the beetles feed on the alfalfa blooms. When the hay is cut and baled, the beetles are crimped or crushed, which only exposes their caustic juices further. While it can take up to 100 blister beetles to kill a horse, much fewer can raise blisters on the inside of a horse's mouth or cause a bout of colic. Be on the beetle lookout. Watch for the dried insects pressed inside flakes of alfalfa. If you notice any, discard the feed.