

Insect Pest Management in Alfalfa Grown for Seed Production - 2025

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This article presents information on the biology and chronological development of insect pests in Saskatchewan alfalfa seed production, and methods to control them. The major insect pests of alfalfa grown for seed in the province are *Lygus* bug, alfalfa plant bug, and alfalfa weevil. Pea aphids and grasshoppers are occasional pests. The following table gives an indication of the life cycles of *Lygus* bug and alfalfa plant bug in Saskatchewan. The accompanying notes outline the optimum insect pest management program to follow for alfalfa seed production, followed by a list of insecticides currently registered for control of insect pests in alfalfa grown for seed production.

TIME PERIOD	<i>LYGUS</i> BUG	ALFALFA PLANT BUG
Winter	Overwinters as adults in headlands and tree rows.	Overwinters as eggs in alfalfa straw and stubble.
Crop is approximately 6 inches in height - late May, early June.	Adults migrate into fields, first around edges and gradually into the center. Adults feed on rapidly growing alfalfa, and the females begin laying eggs in the alfalfa stems.	The eggs hatch and first instar nymphs begin feeding on new alfalfa growth. Young nymphs are orange-green and have "clubbed" antennae.
Crop is actively growing - late May to mid-June.	The eggs hatch, and first / second instars develop. They are very small, active, and bright green.	The population grows in size and number, and second / third instars develop. Third instar nymphs have small wing pads. Nymphs become bright green.
Mid-June - crop is actively growing and first bud clusters are apparent.	Second and third instars develop. The third instars have wing pads and black spots on their backs.	Fourth instars develop. Prominent black body hairs and longer body distinguish APB from <i>Lygus</i> bug.

NOTE: When third instar nymphs of *Lygus* bug, along with third and a few fourth instar nymphs of alfalfa plant bug, are present, the hatch is well underway. Insecticide application should be timed at this stage so that you are not spraying when there are still a large number of eggs present. Eggs are well protected and will not be affected by insecticides.

TIME PERIOD	<i>LYGUS</i> BUG	ALFALFA PLANT BUG
Mid to late June - buds and early flowers are present.	Third, fourth and fifth instars are present in increasing numbers, and the old adults decrease in number.	Fourth and fifth instars and new adults are present in increasing numbers.
Early July	New adults appear. They are lighter in colour and newer-looking than the old adults.	New adults mate and the females begin egg-laying. The adults disperse.
Early - mid July	New adults mate and some females lay eggs, while others begin physiologically preparing for the winter. <i>Lygus</i> of all stages are still present, but nymph numbers decrease.	The adults gradually disappear from the fields.
Late July - early August	A second hatch may occur and new young nymphs appear, progressing to later instars if climate and weather allow. Monitor this population.	A second hatch of APB has occurred once in the last several decades in central Saskatchewan. Areas in southern Saskatchewan may be more likely to experience this second hatch. Hot, early summers are key in watching for a second hatch.
Mid - late August	Migration of adults into late seed fields may cause a rapid climb in numbers and excessive damage to green seed in late August and September.	

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL OF INSECT PESTS

Only a few of the many insect species found in alfalfa fields are pests, while others (typically more susceptible to insecticides) are natural enemies that prey upon or parasitize the insect pests. Therefore, it is important to monitor for the presence of these beneficial insects as well as monitoring insect pest numbers, and to apply pesticides only when necessary.

CULTURAL CONTROL OF INSECT PESTS

1. Burning Stubble and Debris

Burning stubble and debris in the spring will help to control:

- alfalfa plant bug (APB)
- alfalfa weevil adults
- alfalfa seed chalcid
- other species that overwinter in the field

Burning also offers the benefit of field sanitation, destroying the crop disease reservoir in stubble and debris; another benefit is the immediate release of some nutrients to the crop. However, burning at the right time can present a challenge, since burning can be difficult to control, can set crop growth back and delay bloom, and can destroy organic material. Burning on an annual basis detracts from the soil improvement aspects of the alfalfa seed crop and is not recommended.

2. Cultivation

Early spring cultivation to incorporate straw and stubble is an alternative to spring burning that decreases the level of alfalfa plant bug infestation. Cultivation can be either between-row, or broadcast. Alfalfa appears to be unharmed by the operation. Cultivation also removes winter annual and early germinating spring annual weeds, and levels pocket gopher mounds in the field.

3. Monitoring in May and June

Monitoring is done using a 38 cm diameter sweep net and making five individual 180 degree walking sweeps at each field site, with at least one sampling site for every 10 acres. Insect numbers and stages are counted and tabulated, and the total number of *Lygus* + APB per individual sweep is thus calculated.

What will I see in May and June?

Insects expected in May and June in chronological order:

- beneficial ladybird beetles, damsel bugs and spiders are present
- *Lygus* adults migrate into fields and begin egg-laying
- APB eggs hatch, young nymphs begin feeding
- alfalfa weevil adults become active and begin egg-laying
- *Lygus* eggs hatch, young nymphs begin feeding
- alfalfa weevil eggs hatch and larvae begin feeding
- grasshoppers and aphids may be present
- *Lygus* and APB nymphs develop into new adults

4. Monitoring in July and August

What will I see in July and August?

- *Lygus* and APB 4th / 5th instar nymphs, and new *Lygus* and APB adults appear
- APB adults decrease in number after egg-laying
- peak feeding activity by alfalfa weevil larvae extends to mid-July
- second generation *Lygus* and APB eggs may hatch in south and central regions
- pea aphids and grasshopper numbers may build up
- populations of beneficial insects, including ladybird beetles, damsel bugs, lacewings, and spiders, build up; other beneficial insects, including big-eyed bugs and minute pirate bugs, are also present, as are parasitic wasps

INSECTICIDE TREATMENTS

1. Pre-bloom Insecticide Treatment

Generally, season-long control of insects in alfalfa seed can be achieved using pre-bloom insecticide application. This application must be timed to best control alfalfa weevil, *Lygus*, and alfalfa plant bug populations without affecting beneficial insects and pollinators. Check alfalfa seed fields with a sweep net.

Why would I use a pre-bloom insecticide treatment?

- if the numbers of insect pests exceed economic threshold levels for the region (estimated at 4 alfalfa plant bugs or 8 *Lygus* bugs per individual sweep in parkland Saskatchewan or a combination of 5 *Lygus* + alfalfa plant bugs)
- for alfalfa weevil, estimated at 20 - 25 larvae per individual (180 °) sweep or when 35 - 50% of plant tips show damage

When do I apply this insecticide treatment?

- APB nymphs are in the 1st - 4th instars
- 3rd instar *Lygus* nymphs are present, along with 1st / 2nd instar nymphs (the presence of 3rd instar nymphs indicates that the hatch is well underway and there are few eggs left to hatch); burned fields are generally in early bud stage, non-burned fields are in late bud stage

NOTE: The pre-bloom insecticide treatment can be detrimental to beneficial insects and pollinators such as bumble bees, solitary bee species, and honey bees. If insecticide application coincides with the bloom of narrow-leaved hawk's beard or dandelion:

- (a) use a chemical with a short residual period
- (b) avoid insecticide drift into non-target locations
- (c) spray in the evening after bees have stopped foraging

These practices will minimize the risk to beneficial insects and pollinators.

2. Summer and Late Summer Insecticide Treatments

If an insecticide application is needed during the bloom period, it must be selective for insect pest species and timed to cause the least harm to pollinators.

Why would I need to apply a summer insecticide treatment?

Generally, if an insecticide is used in the pre-bloom period, then further insecticide applications will not be needed. However, there can be situations when insect pest numbers during the pre-bloom monitoring period do not trigger the need for an insecticide application. In these instances, it is very important to continue to monitor the fields during July and August. A mid-season or late season economic infestation of alfalfa weevil, *Lygus*, and / or alfalfa plant bug is not common, but there is a possibility that insect pest numbers will exceed their damage thresholds. There are no firm damage thresholds for this time of year, since these situations rarely occur. The best advice is to monitor these fields and watch for damaged pods.

Alfalfa weevils can cause considerable damage to alfalfa seed fields throughout the prairies. Alfalfa weevils overwinter as adults in alfalfa stubble, and feed and lay eggs on young alfalfa stems. The small green alfalfa weevil larvae defoliate leaves, stems, and buds. Heavy foliar feeding by alfalfa weevil can cause decreased stand height and flower development. Alfalfa weevil larvae pupate in July, and the summer generation adults feed for a short period before seeking overwintering sites in the fall.

It is quite common to see an increase in *Lygus* bug numbers in the second or third week of July and up until the first two weeks of August; normally, the numbers will then drop. However, if mid-season monitoring shows in excess of 8 *Lygus* bugs per individual sweep for more than two weeks, the crop is suffering from moisture stress, and the seed is young and milky, insects can cause damage to the seed crop.

Occasionally, late-blooming alfalfa seed fields can act as magnets for *Lygus* bug adults which are leaving cut hay fields or maturing fields of canola and grain in search of a new feeding ground prior to the onset of hibernation. These adult *Lygus* bug populations can reach very high numbers and can severely damage young green seed pods. Although there are no firm damage thresholds for these situations, levels of 15 *Lygus* bugs per individual sweep in green fields in late August have been seen to lead to alfalfa seed pod drop. Monitor these fields closely and watch for pod damage or pod drop.

Generally, alfalfa plant bug adults leave the fields in mid-July and are not seen again. However, in exceptional years, an abnormally early summer season will allow for the development of a full second generation of alfalfa plant bug, which may necessitate a second insecticide treatment.

In Saskatchewan, the pea aphid overwinters primarily in the egg stage on alfalfa and other perennial legumes. Depending on accumulation of heat units, there can be five or more generations per year. Small numbers of this overwintering population are present in spring and early summer, but the main part of the population migrates into Saskatchewan on air streams from southern areas of the continent, usually in mid-July.

Aphid populations can remain high until early to mid-August, when aphid crowding, plant quality decline, and increased predator and parasite numbers cause the development of winged aphids; these winged aphids then leave the fields and the aphid populations crash. Inclement weather, especially heavy rain and high winds, can also cause aphid populations to decrease.

Although pea aphid populations cause alfalfa seed loss infrequently, if aphid migration into Saskatchewan occurs early in the season, and if weather conditions are optimal for aphid reproduction, populations may reach levels high enough to cause yield decline, especially if the crop is drought-stressed. Some growers believe that in certain years, pea aphid numbers warrant treatment. The damage threshold is about 200 pea aphids per individual sweep (this equates to about one quarter cup of pea aphids in the sweep net after 5 sweeps).

The pea aphid prefers to feed on field peas rather than alfalfa. Alfalfa seed producers in areas with few pea fields may experience more damage than those in areas with many pea fields. Likewise, growers in warmer, more southerly areas of the province may have greater pea aphid problems than growers in more northerly areas.

Grasshoppers are an occasional problem in alfalfa seed production. Grasshopper damage generally appears to be more severe when the alfalfa seed crop is thin, dry, and under environmental stress. A lush, thick, and healthy alfalfa seed field is able to support a grasshopper population with little damage. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture website provides important information including “Grasshoppers - Overview, Control Methods, and Economic Thresholds” and a “Grasshopper Survey Map” which outlines grasshopper infestation ratings in detail based on adult grasshopper survey counts undertaken throughout the province in the 2024 field season. A severe infestation is equivalent to 13 or more grasshoppers moving away as you take a step in the field. Often, grasshopper numbers will appear high on alfalfa leafcutting bee shelter access roads within the field, but on these roads and in open areas, numbers over 25 grasshoppers per step equate to a severe infestation.

When would I apply a summer insecticide treatment?

- *Lygus* bugs and APB are in 4th and 5th instar stage, and significantly exceed the early season damage threshold (estimated at 4 alfalfa plant bugs or 8 *Lygus* bugs per individual sweep in parkland Saskatchewan or a combination of 5 *Lygus* + alfalfa plant bugs), or
- 2nd generation *Lygus* bug hatch is well underway and exceeds the 8 per individual sweep early season damage threshold for more than a week, or
- when numbers of aphids (200 per sweep) or grasshoppers (a severe infestation might be 13 or more grasshoppers per step) warrant
- remember that a healthy, lush alfalfa crop can withstand much more damage than a drought-stressed crop

Order a sweep net directly from: Terry Weber / Pro Metal Industries
261 Sherwood Road
RM of Sherwood, SK S4K 0A8
Tel (306) 525-6710 office
Cell (306) 519-7350
Cost \$91.45 + taxes & shipping

Insect pests of alfalfa grown for seed production in Saskatchewan

Common Name	Scientific Name
Alfalfa Plant Bug	<i>Adelphocoris lineolatus</i>
Alfalfa Weevil	<i>Hypera postica</i>
Grasshopper	<i>Melanoplus</i> / <i>Camnula</i> spp.
<i>Lygus</i> Bug (Tarnished Plant Bug)	<i>Lygus lineolaris</i>
Pea Aphid	<i>Acyrtosiphon pisum</i>
Two-spotted Spider Mite	<i>Tetranychus urticae</i>

Insecticides registered for control of insect pests in alfalfa seed production

Insecticide	Insect Pests Controlled
Aceta 70 WP / Assail 70 WP (acetamiprid)	Alfalfa Plant Bug, <i>Lygus</i> Bug
Acramite 50 WS (bifenazate)	Two-spotted Spider Mite
Beleaf 50 SG / Carbine (flonicamid)	Pea Aphid, <i>Lygus</i> Bug
Coragen 20 SC / Coragen MaX (chlorantraniliprole)	Alfalfa Weevil (suppression), Grasshopper
Cygon 480-Ag / Diamante 4 / Lagon 480 E (dimethoate)	Alfalfa Plant Bug, Alfalfa Weevil (reduction), Grasshopper, <i>Lygus</i> Bug, Pea Aphid
Decis 100 EC / Poleci 2.5 EC Western / Advantage Deltamethrin 5 EC (deltamethrin)	Alfalfa Weevil, <i>Lygus</i> Bug, Grasshopper (Decis only)
Labamba / Matador / Silencer 120 EC / Zivanta (lambda-cyhalothrin)	Alfalfa Plant Bug, Alfalfa Weevil, Grasshopper, <i>Lygus</i> Bug, Pea Aphid
Oberon (spiromesifen)	Two-spotted Spider Mite

Insecticides registered for use on alfalfa (alfalfa seed production not stipulated)

<i>Malathion 85 E</i>	<i>Alfalfa Weevil, Lygus Bug, Grasshopper, Pea Aphid, Two-spotted Spider Mite</i>
<i>Sefina (afidopyropen)</i>	<i>Pea Aphid</i>
<i>Sivanto Prime (flupyradifurone)</i>	<i>Pea Aphid</i>

Note: Information on reducing bee losses from insecticides, insecticide resistance, and insecticide mode of action, along with product information on insecticides registered for use in alfalfa seed production, may be found in the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture / 2025 Guide to Crop Protection - Insect Control Section (pages 746 - 857). Also included in the Insect Control Section is a table on "Hazard Ratings and Residual Times of Insecticides to Bees" (page 747) which provides toxicity rating and residue hazard information for a number of insecticides. For complete information on individual insecticide products, consult the crop protection company product label.