Common Alfalfa Leafspot

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
COMMON ALFALFA LEAFSPOT

Pseudopeziza or common leafspot, one of the most destructive diseases of alfalfa, occurs wherever alfalfa is grown. Plants are not killed by the disease, but defoliation causes loss of vigor and reduces hay quality and yield. In general, the second and third hay crops are damaged more than the first.

The disease can be distinguished from other alfalfa leaf spots by visual observations. Small, circular brown spots, approximately 1/16-inch in diameter, develop on the leaflets. When the spots are fully developed, the centers become thickened and a tiny, light brown, cup-shaped fruiting body (Apothecium) forms on the upper surface of the leaf. The presence of these fruiting bodies in the center of the spots serves as means for positive identification of the disease.

Fruiting bodies of the alfalfa leafspot fungus (Apothecia) are produced throughout the growing season, except during prolonged dry weather. Tiny spores, (visible only under high magnification) are discharged from the apothecia and are carried by winds to other plants, and in this way, quickly spread the disease throughout the field. The leafspot fungus overwinters on dead, undecayed leaves. It has not been shown to be seed-borne.

All of the adapted varieties of alfalfa are at least moderately susceptible to common leafspot. Highly resistant lines have been selected and are being incorporated into new synthetic varieties.

Left: Showing Common Leafspot on Alfalfa.
Any practicable method that helps to remove infected leaves from the field, especially in early cuttings, will reduce leaf-spot infection later in the season. When leafspot disease begins to cause defoliation, the alfalfa should be cut as soon as possible, to save as many leaves as possible, and to remove sources of infection for later growth. Except in prolonged wet seasons, this practice will usually check the disease and prevent excessive defoliation in later cuttings.