

Hoary Alyssum ***Berteroa incana***

Hoary alyssum is a perennial weed commonly found in pastures and hay in the upper midwest that has been known to cause toxicity in horses. Plants are 1 to 3 feet tall, grayish-green, and hairy, with small, oblong leaves. The flowers are white and have four deeply divided petals.

Horses generally prefer other forages and will tend to avoid hoary alyssum in the pasture. Consequently, most problems occur with horses that have ingested hay that contains hoary alyssum. However, toxicity has been noted in pastured horses, so it is important to keep it from gaining a foothold in your pasture. Hay that contains more than 20% hoary alyssum should not be fed to horses.

Hoary alyssum is well adapted to dry conditions and is often found on sandy or gravelly soils, or in disturbed areas. It will tend to increase in any field, regardless of soil type, following drought or winterkill. Problems in hay seem to crop up most in the second cutting. The best prevention is a healthy, dense, vigorous pasture. Control measures include pulling by hand, digging, or mowing. Any method of control should be undertaken before the plant flowers, as it produces a multitude of seeds which allow it to spread rapidly. Several herbicides are also effective; however, care must be taken to follow all precautions with regard to herbicide use in a pasture situation.

Ingestion of hoary alyssum can cause different reactions from one horse to another. In fact, about 50% of horses are not affected by it at all. Symptoms are usually observed 12 to 24 hours after ingestion, and in mild cases will present as depression and mild stocking up. Occasionally, short term diarrhea and a fever will also be present. These symptoms normally subside 2 to 4 days after removing hoary alyssum from the diet. More severe reactions seem to be associated with higher percentages (30 to 70%) of hoary alyssum in the hay. Once again, half the horses who ingested even these higher levels showed no signs of toxicity. Horses experiencing a more severe reaction may show stocking up, a fever of 103 degrees or higher, warm hooves, laminitis, joint stiffness, a reluctance to move, and/or a "camped out" stance. Very rarely, death has been reported as associated with ingestion of hoary alyssum, although this has not happened in clinical trials.

Treatment includes removing hoary alyssum from the horse's diet and providing supportive care as outlined by your veterinarian. With proper care, recovery usually takes 2 to 4 days. However, in horses with laminitis, recovery can be variable. Also, horses with laminitis as a result of hoary alyssum toxicity should not be transported during the acute phase of toxicosis to reduce damage to the hooves. Stress levels should be kept to a minimum for one month after recovery has begun. Horses that have experienced toxicity due to hoary alyssum may require a few months before they return to full health and performance levels.