



# Pest e-alerts



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## Fall Yard Decorations and Straw Itch Mites

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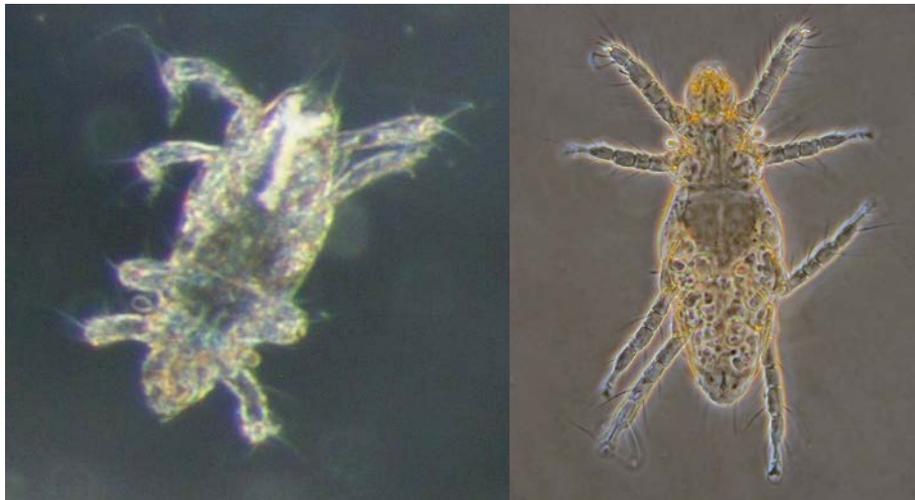
As cooler evenings and nights set in for the fall season another common sighting are yard decorations to signify the change in seasons. As you drive across Oklahoma you can see yard after yard with hay bales and pumpkins. An unwanted guest you may be bringing into your yard with the hay bales are straw itch mites (*Pyemotes tritici*). These mites are associated with stored commodities

including hay and have been commonly found in wheat straw hay. Recently, a sample of wheat straw hay was submitted to the Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Lab at Oklahoma State University and it contained several straw itch mite females that were about to lay hundreds of eggs. Given the warmer temperatures and the identification of these mites in hay, individuals may experience chigger like bites on arms and trunk of their bodies.

### Biology of the Straw Itch Mite

The straw itch mite is very small and is normally only 0.2 mm in length. Pregnant females can occasionally be seen without the aid of a microscope and can reach 2 mm in length. The life cycle from eggs to larva, nymph and adult will usually take two to four weeks. Straw itch mites are predatory on insects that can reside in stored commodities such as hay.

Gravid (pregnant) female straw itch mite.



Female straw itch mites, normal view (L), slide mounted (R).

### Symptoms of itch mite bites

When individuals are working with hay that is infested with mites they can develop skin irritations from the abdomen to their shoulders. In severe outbreaks the mite bites can occur all over an individual's body. This mite is a non-burrowing mite and the bite mark is a result of a reaction to the mite's saliva. A characteristic of the bite are usually presented as a red welt with a central blister and is accompanied with a severe itching sensation. Rubbing or scratching the bite can result in secondary skin infections or dermatitis.



Rash caused by itch mites. Source: Corazza et al. 2014; Acta Derm Venereol 94: 248-249.

## Treatment of the itch mite bites

If you have been handling hay bales and have bites on you then the first thing you should do is remove the clothing that was worn during your activities and shower before putting on clean clothing. When red welts appear try not to scratch and apply an anti-itch lotion. In severe cases of mite attacks seek medical advice promptly so that the likelihood of secondary infections can be reduced.

## Prevention of itch mites

Straw itch mites are commonly associated with hay and most cases of mite bites occur on individuals handling hay for livestock operations. However, one of the most common sources of straw itch mites is wheat hay and the likelihood of homeowners that purchase this type of hay to be bitten is high. If you experience bites after placing hay bales in your yard then those hay bales should be removed if warm weather persists. Animals can also have a reaction to the straw itch mite bite so if a pet has small red welts after hay bales have been placed in the yard then the hay bales should be removed as well. A preventative method to help reduce the affect the straw itch mite has on homeowners wanting to decorate with hay bales is to apply an insect repellent before handling the hay bales.

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### **Dr. Richard Grantham - Director, Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Laboratory**

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