

Growing Again

Tomatoes OK to plant, specialist says

By RODNEY MINOR
The Leader-Herald

Gardeners throughout the area battled late blight last year, which attacked potatoes and — most notably — tomatoes.

It's still early in the season this year, according to Crystal Stewart, horticulture and agriculture educator and regional vegetable specialist at the Cornell Cooperative Extension Fulton and Montgomery Counties. People don't normally begin their planting until the threat of frost is all but gone, which is closer to June 1.

Stewart said as a precaution, the group is still recommending people throw out any leftover potatoes from last year rather than plant them.

"Potatoes are more of a concern right now," she said. "If any of those infected [are planted], we could begin the cycle all over again."

Late blight showed up earlier than usual last year, in part, due to the increased amount of rain and colder temperatures that hit the area over the summer.

The disease leaves large lesions, larger than a quarter, on the leaf of the tomato plant. There also will be a white, fuzzy growth on the backside of the leaf.

According to a news release from Cornell Cooperative Extension, late blight is a fungal-like disease that was responsible for the infamous Irish Potato Famine. The disease was found on tomato transplants in mid-June, much earlier than previously recorded in this region of the U.S.

"For tomato growers in the affected areas [most of the Northeast in 2009], the slate is wiped clean in terms of survival [late blight] from last year," the news release said.

Late blight also is not capable of surviving in the soil and is not seed-borne in tomatoes. Growers do not need to rotate away from the planting area they used last year specifically for late blight control, the release said.

Stewart said telling people to get rid of their potatoes from last year is not something the organization likes to do because people often have developed and selected the varieties of potatoes they enjoy growing. However, it will help make sure late blight does not cause the problems it did in 2009.

As far as tomatoes are concerned, Stewart said any tomato plants infected from last year are gone.

"Don't be afraid to plant tomatoes," she said.

Wayne Pooler of Perth, who grows about 30 different kinds of vegetables including tomatoes, said the situation with late blight basically requires a wait-and-see approach.

"There's no fountain of information [about what will happen with late blight] — there are just guesses," he said.

State action

New York State Agriculture Commissioner Patrick Hooker on April 29 announced a new strategy to enhance the state's detection and eradication efforts of late blight.

"In an effort to be more prepared for the possible introduction of late blight, the department has met with industry stakeholders and leaders, as well as members from Cornell University's Plant Disease Diagnostic Clinic and Cooperative Extension, to put into place a strategy that enables rapid detection, clear communication and an organized system to protect plant health this summer," the commissioner said in a news release.

The department will be survey plants in stores as well as in commercial greenhouses, while Cooperative Extension will follow up with any suspect cases in the field from commercial growers or home gardeners.

The actions the department will take include:

- Starting April 1 and continuing through the end of June, state horticultural inspectors have been visiting greenhouses and plant retailers throughout the state in order to document sources and inspect plants for disease.

- The department is notifying out-of-state plant distributors of the 2009 late blight incident and seeking their cooperation in helping New York state better understand where plants are traveling to. This will help inspectors prioritize inspections in upcoming months, a news release said.

- All horticultural inspectors and county cooperative extension offices have been asked to provide standardized information for suspect cases of late blight on plants in the state. The information gathered will include the location of the suspect plant, the type of symptoms, as well as other critical information, allowing a more coordinated follow up on possible infestations.



- The department will have access to an electronic list maintained by Cooperative Extension to help ensure a swift and organized response in the event of late blight.

- The department will reach out to other states on a regular basis to stay informed of potential late blight activity across the nation and to help coordinate responses, a news release said.

If late blight is detected in the state's tomato or potato crop this season, the release said, the suspect plants will be subject to quarantine upon initial visible diagnosis by a state horticultural inspector and the product sample will be sent to the Plant Disease Diagnostic Clinic at Cornell University for confirmation. If confirmed with late blight, the plants will be disposed of under state supervision and a trace back and trace forward will be initiated in order to try and locate other possibly infected plants.

For more information, visit the website, www.vegetablemdonline.ppath.cornell.edu/ or call 762-3909, Ext. 106. //



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Young tomato plants are shown for sale at the Home Depot in Amsterdam on Wednesday.



Above, young tomato plants for sale are shown at the Home Depot in Amsterdam on Wednesday.

At right, a young tomato plant available for purchase is shown at the store Wednesday.



Photos by
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The Leader-Herald