

BIG-BOX BLIGHT HITS TOMATOES

Cornell links Southern wholesaler to problem with backyard favorite

BRIAN NEARING STAFF WRITER

Section: ---, Page: D1

Date: Thursday, June 23, 2011

ALBANY -- A highly destructive tomato blight has moved into New York and several other Northeastern states, brought in on seedlings raised by a Southern wholesaler and sold by the thousands through big-box retail stores, according to Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Called late blight, the fungus-based disease spreads rapidly through the air, and can also infect potatoes, said John Mishanec, an Albany-based cooperative extension educator who last week found infected tomato plants for sale at a Scotia retailer.

"I've gotten e-mails that blighted plants have been found in Tompkins County, Plattsburgh and Malone," he said. Diseased plants also have been found for sale in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Maine, all sold under the name of Bonnie Plants, shipped out of a greenhouse in Georgia, he added.

"This is a problem with big industrial agriculture, with the disease being spread all over through big-box stores," Mishanec said. "These big operations don't have the same kind of quality control that your local greenhouse has."

Infected plants display dark spots, or lesions, the size of a quarter or larger. Lesions become water-soaked after watering or from heavy dew, with edges showing a border of white fungus. The fungus releases spores that spread the disease.

"This moves very quickly. I have seen a 10-acre tomato field fine on a Monday, and by Friday the whole field is dead," said Mishanec. Blight flourishes during the kind of cool and rainy summers the Capital Region is experiencing.

The state Department of Agriculture and Markets is waiting for test results on suspect tomatoes to come back from the lab at Cornell, said department spokeswoman Jessica Chittenden.

"We are prepared to act once that happens, which could include steps to remove plants from the point of sale," she said. Test results are expected within a few days, she added.

There are commercial treatments to prevent blight, but for home gardeners who find infected plants, the best approach is to remove the plants, bag them and throw them in the garbage, Mishanec said. Infected plants should not be used as mulch.

The problem likely exists from Ohio to Maine, according to a June 27 report by Thomas A. Zitter, a professor of plant pathology at Cornell University.

"Never before has such an extensive distribution of infected plants occurred," he wrote. "We have spread the word of this impending disaster, and within a day the original supplier, working with U.S. Department of Agriculture in the affected states, has removed most of the initial source plants."

The 91-year-old Bonnie Plant company has 62 greenhouse complexes in 38 states, according to its Web site.

Brian Nearing can be reached at 454-5094 or by email at bnearing@timesunion.com.

BOX:

Fungus

Tomato plants infected by late blight have dark spots, or lesions, the size of a quarter or larger. Lesions become water-soaked after watering or from heavy dew, with edges showing a border of white fungus. The fungus releases spores that spread the disease.

Home gardeners should remove infected plants, bag them and throw them in the garbage, not the mulch pile.

Source: Cornell Cooperative Extension