

Late Blight Update
By Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

I'm sure all of us who tried to grow tomatoes or potatoes last year remember late blight. It is a fungal plant disease, the same one in fact that caused the Irish Potato Famine. Its spores are carried in the air, particularly during storms, and of course last summer was very wet. Many growers and gardeners lost their potatoes and their outdoor tomatoes and the question they are asking is, "is it going to come back?"

The answer is, it might. In late May, the disease was confirmed in isolated fields in Louisiana, Maryland and Pennsylvania, and last week a case was confirmed in southern Connecticut. What plant pathologists believe is happening is that infected potatoes that were not harvested last summer have "volunteered" or survived the winter in the soil and grown into a new potato plant this spring. These young plants can be infected if the tuber was infected. The infected plant can then produce spores that will be picked up by air and rain storms and spread to other plants and other fields.

One of the advantages of living in the north is that when it comes to certain agricultural problems, like late blight, we can get some advanced warning by paying attention to what is happening to our south. So what do we do with this information?

- Keep checking last year's potatoes and pull up any "volunteers" you find. I started getting reports of volunteer potatoes in late May and I am still getting occasional reports, primarily north of the notch.
- Monitor this years potatoes and tomatoes for symptoms of disease, particularly after rain events (for photos and updates go to <http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/LateBlight.htm>)
- Trellis or stake your tomatoes to improve air flow around the plant. This will help keep the leaves drier which will help protect your plants from a variety of fungal diseases.
- Call your County Extension Office if you think you may have late blight. In Grafton County the number is 787-6944.

The good news is that with vigilance, and a little cooperation from the weather, the disease will be very unlikely to spread as fast or impact as many farms and gardens as it did last year.

Look for next week's column by our County Forester, David Falkenham.

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