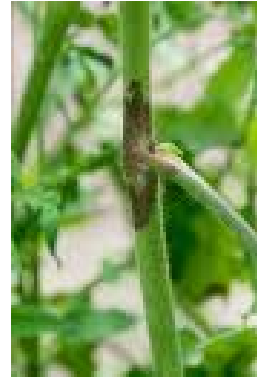


## Prospects for Late Blight in Tomatoes for Cheshire County Gardeners

Last year, many gardeners never got to enjoy the tomatoes they planted. Instead, they saw their vines wither sometimes in as little as two or three days from a fungal disease called late blight. Understandably, these gardeners are wondering if the same thing will happen this year.



Late blight makes its way in NH every few years, usually when spores blow up in weather systems from the south. Once it arrives, it can spread with alarming speed if conditions are right: rainy or humid weather with temperatures between 65-75F. Last year, there were infected seedlings that made their way into large retailers throughout the northeast, and because all the rain and humidity we experienced last summer created perfect conditions, late blight overran the entire region quickly.

It's still too early to tell how likely another outbreak will be this year. The weather has been relatively dry this year, so we haven't had the conditions that are conducive for fungal diseases to spread. If the weather stays sunny and dry for the season, we may have very little in the way of disease outbreaks. However, if we get another prolonged stretch of wet weather, we could face the same risk.

In the meantime, we urge gardeners to take a few precautionary measures in order to further minimize the risk. Start with seedlings that you grow yourself, or that you purchase from a reliable local grower. If you plant potatoes, which are also susceptible to late blight, use certified seed potatoes instead of leftovers from last year's harvest or table stock from the supermarket. Use wide row spacing when planting your tomato seedlings, and keep plants staked and pruned in order to promote good air circulation and a drier environment throughout the plant canopy.

Gardeners should also monitor their plants regularly for signs of infection; late blight first shows up on a potato or tomato plant as a dark grayish, nickel-sized lesion, often with a dark, water-soaked edge. In wet weather, these lesions become covered with whitish fuzz that produces as many as 200,000 spores that get carried off by wind. Nearby plants become infected, and all infected plants can completely collapse within just two or three days.

Gardeners can use fungicides, but these products are intended to protect plants against an infection rather than eliminating an existing infection. Fungicides containing the active ingredients chlorothalonil or mancozeb seem to be the most effective; copper fungicides only provide partial control, but they are the best option for gardeners who want to adhere to organic gardening practices. Always follow the directions on any pesticide label carefully.

If you see any infected plants, pull them out of the ground and dispose of them and all adjacent plants immediately; tie them up in a plastic bag and bring them to the landfill instead of putting them on the compost pile. If you're not sure what you see is late blight or some other leaf spot, call the Cheshire County UNH Cooperative Extension office at 352-4550.