

Tomato and Potato Late Blight Questions Answered

By Heather Bryant, Extension Educator for Agricultural Resources

In the last couple of weeks our office has been inundated with questions about late blight. Late blight is a fungal plant disease that attacks tomatoes and potatoes. It's the same disease that caused the Irish Potato Famine and it thrives in the wet weather conditions that we have experienced this summer. I'd like to bring your attention to the problem and to answer some of the more common questions.

“How did it get here?” Normally, this disease does not survive a New Hampshire winter, and it has to travel north on weather patterns. This year, unfortunately, infected tomato transplants grown in Alabama were unknowingly sold to a number of large retail stores throughout the northeast. In turn those infected transplants were sold to home gardeners, and have begun producing spores that spread through the air. With help from the rain, they have been spreading fast. So far the disease has been reported all over the state and on both sides of the Connecticut River. As of this writing, it has been reported in 14 of the towns in Grafton County.

“What does it look like?” Dark green or brown water soaked lesions will appear on the leaves and stems of the plant. Often a small amount of brown or white fuzz will appear on the underside of the leaves. Infected tomato fruit will have light to dark brown hard lesions on them. Potatoes will have lesions on the skins and black streaks through the center of the potato. You can go to our website to see photos of these symptoms (<http://extension.unh.edu/>).

“What if I'm still not sure whether or not I have it?” Bring a sample to the office, sealed in a plastic bag, and I'd be happy to take a look at it for you. We are located in the Grafton County Administration Building in the County Complex on Route 10 in North Haverhill.

“What can I do?” There are fungicides that will prevent and even cure small amounts of infection, but these are not available to home gardeners. Commercial growers with questions should contact me directly.

If you find late blight in your tomatoes, they cannot be saved, but they can spread the infection to your potatoes or your neighbor's gardens. The best option is pull them up by their roots, put them in trash bags and send them to the landfill.

If you find it in your potatoes, or if think you will soon, you may be able to save them. Cut or mow the potatoes down and bag up the plants, leaving the potatoes in the ground for two to three weeks. Any spores left on the surface of the soil will die in the sunlight, while your potato skins will harden, allowing you to harvest them with minimal risk of infecting them. Check the potatoes carefully and dispose of any potatoes that appear to have symptoms.

“Can I cut out the bad parts of my tomatoes and use the rest in canning?” This is not a good idea. Your canning recipe assumes that the pH of your food product is at a certain level, and we do not have good data on what this disease does to the pH of the tomatoes. In addition, fruit symptoms continue to develop after you pick them, so a tomato from an infected plant that looks fine today, may not in a couple of days.

“How do I prevent this next year?” If you only grew tomatoes this year, you have very little to worry about. The winter weather will kill the spores. In the future, growing your own transplants at home or buying them from a supplier who grew them in the Northeast will decrease the chances of buying infected transplants.

If you grew potatoes this year you should be very careful not to put either tomatoes or potatoes in that area next year. The disease can survive the winter on potatoes inadvertently left underground. If that potato sprouts next summer, the plant may be infected. UNH Vegetable Specialist, Becky Grube Sideman recommends planting something very different from potatoes, so that if a potato does sprout, you will immediately recognize it and you can pull it up, bag it and send it to the landfill.

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact our office at (603) 787-6944. We are open from 8am to 4pm M-F, and we will be happy to talk to you.

The information in this column was compiled from a number of sources including the Universities of New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, and Cornell Cooperative Extension.

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

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. University of New Hampshire, U.S. Department of Agriculture and N.H. counties cooperating.