

# Late Blight Update

by Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

Late blight was confirmed in Grafton County on September 1<sup>st</sup>. So far, it's only one case in a home garden on the western side of the County. Unfortunately, if we get rain or wind from Hurricane Earl it will cause any spores that are in the air to spread. Growers and gardeners alike should keep a close eye on their tomatoes and potatoes. For the latest information on late blight, including management options, please see the following website  
<http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/LateBlight.htm>

As you remember from last season, late blight is a fungal plant disease that affects tomatoes and potatoes. Last year, it arrived in Grafton County on July 1<sup>st</sup> and the rainy weather conditions were ideal for spreading a fungus. By mid August, it had affected most of us trying to grow tomatoes or potatoes.

This year we have been far luckier than we anticipated. The fungus has moved very slowly; it was identified in Connecticut in mid June, in Massachusetts and Maine in late July, and in Vermont in early August. It has also impacted a tiny fraction of growers and gardeners compared to last year.

The slow spread of the disease this year is largely due to the weather. It's been warm and sunny and it's rained, but not constantly, which is exactly the wrong weather for late blight.

However, I think those of us who grow tomatoes and potatoes can also take a little of the credit. Last year when the disease hit, we destroyed our plants in an attempt to slow the spread of the disease. Next, we didn't save infected potatoes for seed which helped minimize overwintering. This year we bought certified potato seed, and either grew our own tomato seedlings or carefully inspected them before buying them. We monitored our plants closely in the field. Many commercial growers used preventative fungicides to protect their crops, which in turn prevented them from becoming sources of infection for others. These actions made it harder for the fungus to take hold during the few periods when the weather conditions were right for spreading spores.

That said, late blight is in the area and those who live along the Connecticut River should pay particular attention to their plants. If it gets into your tomatoes, it's best to bag them up and send them to the landfill. If it gets into your potatoes, you may still be able to save them because the fungus goes into the leaves at the top of the plant first and then has to travel down to the tubers. Just cut the plants off at the soil line and remove them. Then leave the potatoes in the ground for 2-3 weeks to allow the skins to toughen up and the spores at the soil surface to die. When you harvest the potatoes check carefully for signs of disease, and keep checking on them in storage. As with last year, if you suspect you had late blight do not save any of your potatoes for seed. If you have any questions or see anything suspicious in your gardens please call our office at (603) 787-6944.

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

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