



# Long Island gardens

- **Gardeners see** disease signs — spotted leaves, lesions, rotted fruit
- **Cool temperatures,** rain create ideal conditions for blight to spread

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Farmers know the ominous signs of late blight — spotted leaves, dark lesions, rotted fruit — from the disease's appearance every few years in their fields.

This summer, home gardeners on Long Island got some unwelcome exposure, too.

Alberta Russell, a Mastic gardener, had to destroy nine of the 27 tomato plants she cultivated this year. Left unchecked, late blight can wipe out entire tomato and potato fields in just a week.

"I've never seen anything like this," Russell said. "It's a shame."

Plant pathologists report an eruption of late blight in tomatoes across the Northeast this summer. Experts blame a spate of cool, wet weather, which fosters the spread of the disease, as well as infected tomato plants sold at big box stores that they think carried late blight into gardens from Ohio to Maine.

The same fungus that caused the Irish potato famine in the 19th century, late blight was first spotted here this year in late June in a Riverhead potato field. The disease has been confirmed in 15 or so home gardens in Suffolk and on at least five Long Island farms, according to the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

"If we're seeing it in one site, we can feel pretty confident that it's all throughout that area," said Karen Snover-Clift, director of Cornell University's plant disease diagnostic clinic.

## Noticed leaves were curling up

Anthony La Femina of West Islip bought six tomato plants from Lowe's this year. "I noticed they weren't growing and the leaves were curling up on themselves," he said. "I pulled them out, root and all, and put new plants in."

Bonnie Plants, a large Alabama wholesaler, pulled its tomatoes from New York and New England stores in early July but denies that the problem began with its plants, some of which had blight.

Cool temperatures and frequent rainfall created ideal conditions for late blight to spread to healthy fruit in nearby fields.

"You get nights below 50 [degrees] and days below 80 and it just proliferates," said organic farmer Dan Holmes, who had to rip out five of eight rows of tomatoes from the farm at Old Bethpage Restoration Village.

Home gardeners, who tend to be less fa-

**To report a blight outbreak,** call the Cornell Cooperative Extension (631-727-7850 in Suffolk; 516-228-0426 in Nassau), which is tracking the disease.

miliar with the disease, may pose a particular risk for spreading late blight if they fail to properly dispose of infected plants.

"It can move miles," said Meg McGrath, a plant pathologist at the Suffolk extension. While bright sunlight usually kills the spores that spread the disease, "when it's overcast, and then finally it rains — perfect," she said. "Just what the pathogen is looking for."

Shoppers are unlikely to see much of an impact at grocery stores, which buy their produce from all over the world, said Joseph Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau.

But between the weather and the blight, fewer tomatoes than usual could be for sale at local farm stands. East End farmers interviewed last week said the problems had not yet affected their retail prices — \$2 to \$3 a pound, depending on the location and variety.

## Farmers turn to fungicides

News of the disease sent many farmers to their sprayers to dispense fungicide over their crops. Some reported little or no damage, but others took a hit.

Edmund Hodun of Hodun Farms in Calverton said late blight had swept through most his first planting of tomatoes, an acre and a half that typically yields between 150 to 200 boxes of fruit every few days. Now, he said, "I'm basically just trying to pick through and salvage my money. The plants are dying. I'm open for pick-your-own, and people are wandering around in the field asking, 'What happened?'"

Organic farms are especially at risk because the most effective fungicide sprays are not certified for organic use.

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht was relieved to learn this week that tomatoes at her farm, Garden of Eve in Aquebogue, weren't afflicted with late blight. But the weather and other diseases have made it harder to produce her usual array of heirloom tomatoes.

"We just try to be philosophical about it," Kaplan-Walbrecht said. "If you've got torrential rain, your potatoes, celery and lettuces are going to do well."

Jessica Damiano contributed to this report.



**Jeff Rottkamp**  
Fox Hollow Farm  
Baiting Hollow

■ **Found late blight** on a few tomatoes this summer. Blames it on the cool, wet summer and the endemic nature of the disease.

He says he has "quite a few acres" of tomatoes, and that he expects to lose "a little bit, not much." He did use preventive fungicides and he says that has helped.

"I don't have any rotten fruit," he says. "But if you don't pay attention to it, you have a major problem."

"It doesn't go away until you decide to treat for it. You don't want to walk through the field very often if you see it, because the spores will attach themselves to your pant leg."

"All of my tomatoes look beautiful. We've started harvesting, but it's limited because we've got a cooler than normal summer and it's also wetter than normal. The price is going to probably be up a little bit because of the lateness of the crop and the yields are down a little."

— JENNIFER SMITH

# Nasty surprise hits

## IS IT LATE BLIGHT?

Experts advise that home gardeners monitor their tomatoes at least twice a week (daily during wet weather) for signs of late blight.

**Tomatoes:** White-mold encircled gray spots on leaves, and gray or brown lesions on stems. Eventually, fruit exhibits dark, greasy-looking lesions, and plants blacken, wilt and die.

**Potatoes:** Grayish-white-encircled spots on leaves that turn brown as they dry out and brown lesions on stems. Potato tubers display brown or purple lesions that, when cut open, reveal a reddish-brown, granular rot below the surface.

**Not sure?** Place an affected leaf in a sealed plastic bag overnight and check its underside in the morning for the presence of white mold.

**What to do with the plants:** Affected plants must be tightly sealed in plastic bags and put in the trash. They should never be composted or allowed to linger on the ground.

### Can it be prevented?

Preventive fungicides are available, but must be reapplied every week throughout the growing season, making their use impractical for most home gardeners. If you choose to go this route, look for products labeled for use against late blight that contain maneb, mancozeb, chlorothalonil or fixed copper. Of these, only fixed copper is approved as organic. However, it's also the least effective.

— JESSICA DAMIANO



## THEIR STORIES OF BLIGHT

### Alberta and James Russell Mastic

■ **Avid gardeners.** Alberta has been growing tomatoes since 1983. She describes this year's crop as "a real horror."

She planted 27 plants from seed this year, but they soon became blighted and "collapsed."

Russell pulled out and destroyed nine plants. She has been trying to keep the rest healthy. "I've just been taking the leaves and stems off as they're turning black," she said. Despite her efforts, she's not getting any tomatoes.

Her husband, James, calls it "a lousy year in terms of getting decent tomatoes. It's been a complete wash." And he notes it's going to be an expensive year, too.

"Normally, we have a lot of tomatoes, enough to give out to family, and I used to bring them to people on the job when I was working," he said. "We used to freeze a lot, too. Now I'm going to have to go buy the organic ones from the health food store because we didn't have enough growth." — JESSICA DAMIANO



### Christine LaMonica Wading River

■ **A serious gardener.** Started growing plants from seeds in February. Estimates she spends \$500 a year on gardening.

LaMonica's garden is big — 50 feet by 30 feet. She went out one day in mid-June and saw that her garden was "absolutely devastated by blight." In a few days, the damage was done. She lost tomatoes and potatoes. She kept two plants, in an attempt to nurse them back to health, but that didn't work.

Among the blight victims were her heirloom tomatoes, which she calls her "pride and joy."

"It was really horrible to lose all of them in the beginning of the season just as they were starting to fruit," she said. "I do a lot of canning, jarring and make my own tomato sauce. I also give a lot to my co-workers who don't have gardens. This year, I'll have to buy bushels of paste tomatoes and cook them down, but they won't be organic. I know where my stuff comes from and I know there's no chemicals on it, and I feel good about feeding it to my family, so this year, it's just not the same."

"And my son is 3 years old this year, so this is the first year he could understand that you put a seed in a little pot and watch it grow, so he was upset, too." — JESSICA DAMIANO



### Dan Holmes Restoration Farm Old Bethpage

■ **Runs a small organic farm** at Nassau County's Old Bethpage Restoration Village with his wife, Caroline Fanning. Lost most of their tomato crop to late blight; do not use fungicides or sprays.

He says the blight came "about June-ish," and that it looked like a birthmark on the plant. He cultivates eight rows, each 150 feet long, of tomatoes. The crop includes about a dozen varieties. He has pulled up five rows so far. The other three are not looking good.

"Soon after we saw the damage and understood what was going to happen, we contacted all of our shareholders through e-mail. [The farm relies on customers who purchase shares of the harvest upfront and then get produce throughout the growing season.] Probably half of our members, about 150 families, e-mailed back telling us that they understand."

"We've been harvesting whatever good fruits that we can. Last year right now we probably gave each member 5 to 10 pounds of tomatoes, and this year we give them a quart basket." — JENNIFER SMITH

