



If you're growing tomatoes or potatoes, or have nightshade weed growing on your property this year, be on the lookout for late blight disease - a fungus that causes white-mold-encircled gray spots on leaves, blackened stems, wilting and death.

The same disease that caused the Irish Potato Famine in the 1840s, late blight has never occurred this early or as widespread on Long Island, according to Meg McGrath, associate professor at Cornell University's research facility in Riverhead.

"People need to realize this is probably one of the worst diseases we have in the vegetable world," she said.

The airborne disease, which spreads via spores, has been found at the retail level on **Bonnie Plants** tomatoes, which are sold at **The Home Depot, Kmart, Wal-Mart** and **Lowe's** stores on Long Island. Because of the way the fungus spreads, all area tomatoes are at risk.

A Lowe's spokeswoman said customers can receive a new plant by returning a diseased plant, with a receipt, within one year of purchase. A spokeswoman for Home Depot said refunds or exchanges would be made for blighted plants, with or without a receipt.

Last week The Associated Press reported that tomato plants had been removed from **Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Lowe's** and **Kmart** stores in all six New England states, plus New York.

Some Long Islanders have reported finding signs of late blight on tomato plants purchased at **Home Depot stores in Nassau and Suffolk counties**. Stan Feldman of Oakdale called the **Home Depot store in Central Islip** when he noticed tomato plants he purchased there were wilting. "They said to bring them back for a refund," he said.

What can you do? Compare the accompanying photo to your plants and pull up any that show symptoms. Bag them tightly in plastic and dispose of them. Do not compost them. Do not leave any plant parts behind.

Dennis Thomas, Bonnie Plants general manager, insists there never was any evidence of blight at any of the company's 61 growing stations nationwide and that his company did not ship out any infected plants. "None whatsoever," he said. "The last inspections we've had in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and in West Virginia today, showed negative."

Why, then, have fungus sightings only been reported on Bonnie Plants tomatoes?

"We handle, I would say, one thousand times more plants than all the other growers combined, and so theirs are probably out of the stores by now," he said, and the conditions necessary for late blight - cool, damp weather, an airborne pathogen (the fungus) and a host (tomatoes) - were present and able to affect plants still on store shelves.

-- With Carl MacGowan

We spoke with Meg McGrath, associate professor at Cornell University's research facility in

Riverhead, about the outbreak:

What makes this outbreak so unusual?

"This is unprecedented because it's so early in the season, and it's the first time to our knowledge that late blight has appeared in home garden centers."

How widespread is the outbreak:

"It's from Ohio to Maine."

Even though the fungus has only been detected on Bonnie Plants tomatoes, are other plants at risk?

"If you've gone to a Home Depot weeks back and bought a different plant that was nearby there's no guarantee that it's healthy. It was evident to me when I returned to the Home Depot I was looking at that it was spreading."

Are tomatoes from infected plants safe to eat?

"Yes. As long as tomatoes are not rotted, they're safe to eat."

Does the disease live in soil or can planters and garden beds be reused without risking infection to new plants?

"This pathogen cannot survive by itself; it needs to be in plant tissue. So soil and planters should not be infected. They'll be fine for next year, but I wouldn't risk replanting this year because the fungus is still out there."

Is there a cure or preventive measure for home gardens?

"Once the fungus has infected and is inside the plant, as a homeowner there's nothing you can do. There is no cure. The prevention is a fungicide called Chlorothalonil, which is available at garden centers. But you have to realize that you're going to have to spray a lot, every week, and you must be very careful and be safe when applying it. Read the label. Know what you need to wear. When I spray, I wear goggles, a suit, a respirator, gloves and boots. As a home gardener, do you really want to do that? Copper is not that effective, but it's what an organic grower can use. It's a hard disease to control."

How far can spores travel?

"Recognize that this is a horrible disease, so do your best not to infect farms. Spores can get up in the atmosphere and then get rained down all over the region. It's capable of moving very long distances. The last time late blight appeared on Long Island, in August of 2007, the origin was suspected to be eastern Pennsylvania."

How serious is the outbreak?

"Late blight can wipe out an entire farm, particularly an organic farm, very fast. If conditions were favorable with cool, wet rainy weather and the farmer is not using fungicides, the farm could be wiped out in a matter of a couple of weeks."

Are only Bonnie Plants tomatoes affected?

"This is no longer just a Bonnie Plants issue. We're starting to get reports from commercial farms on Long Island. The first report here was from a potato farm."

What should home gardeners do?

"Decide if you're going to fight the battle. You may escape, but you've got to be diligently watching. Be prepared to get rid of your plants if it starts. If you haven't planted tomatoes yet, just plant something else. It's a hard disease to control. Realize that if you have farms nearby, spores could travel and affect them."