

Shortage of plant disease experts threatens tree and crop health, report finds

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Plant pathology has been lost completely or greatly reduced at 11 universities and colleges while fewer than half the institutions which teach biology, agriculture or forestry offer courses in plant pathology, according to a recently published report led by University of Bristol academics.

Researchers say that findings from the British Society for Plant Pathology (BSPP)-funded report threaten Britain's ability to combat new diseases of trees and crop as they show a serious decline in teaching and research on plant diseases in British universities and colleges.

Whilst plant pathology still plays a very prominent part of teaching and

research at the University of Bristol, the audit finds that British universities have appointed very few plant pathologists in the last 20 years. Many of those who remain are aged over 50. The report, led by Dr Diane Hird at the University's School of [Biological Sciences](#), attributes the loss of expertise to a shift towards subjects which bring more short-term income into higher [education institutions](#).

Professor James Brown, President of the British Society of Plant Pathology, said: "These job losses are severe. Britain is not producing graduates with the expertise needed to identify and control plant diseases in our farms and woodlands. One of the most worrying finding is the decline in practical training in plant pathology.

"Only one in seven universities now provide practical classes which give students hands-on experience of plant disease.

"The appearance of ash dieback in British woodlands should be a wake-up call to the government and industry. New diseases threaten our woodlands and our [food crops](#). Plant pathology education in Britain needs to be revived, to reverse the decline in expertise and to give farmers and foresters better ways of controlling these diseases.

"All areas of plant pathology in Britain are under strain. We are especially worried that there are now very few UK experts left in diseases of trees and vegetables."

The 'Audit of Plant Pathology Training and Education in the UK' is published by BSPP today, www.bspp.org.uk/society/bspp_plant_pathology_audit_2012.php.

The report says the position has worsened recently. There has been a long-term decline in plant pathology in many universities but there are now concerns about the long-term viability of the subject in Britain

because of the loss of large numbers of [plant pathology](#) lecturers.

Professor Gary Foster, from the University's School of Biological Sciences and incoming Vice President of BSPP, added: "Plant pathogens affect us all, from the price of our foods, to the plants we can grow in our gardens and allotments, through to our countryside and landscapes. The battle against pathogens happens on a daily basis and we need well trained scientists and specialists to protect the vital food and crops we need worldwide."

Dr Andy Bailey, a plant pathologist at the University's School of Biological Sciences, Bristol, commented: "Teaching students to recognise a few common [plant diseases](#) isn't good enough. If we truly want food security, we need to invest in the next generation of [plant pathologists](#) so they have the knowledge and skills to identify and treat the new diseases which are likely to emerge under changing environmental conditions."

Provided by University of Bristol

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