

Strawberry disease could threaten Hampton Roads' spring harvest

September 9 2024, by Stacy Parker, The Virginian-Pilot



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In a few weeks, strawberry growers in southeast Virginia will plant their crop to be harvested in May. But many are concerned about a disease that could drastically reduce next year's yield.

Neopestalotiopsis disease, which first appeared several years ago in Florida, can cause light to dark brown spots on [plant leaves](#) and rotting of the fruit. To avoid it, some local growers started getting their plants from a supplier in Canada. But now, major nurseries there are also seeing symptoms, and they've recently warned the fruit growers.

"They are basically canceling orders (and in many cases refunding the deposit) or telling plug plant producers and farmers to take plants at their own risk—no reimbursements for bad or infected plants delivered this year," said Phil Brannen, a professor in the Plant Pathology Department at the University of Georgia, in an Aug. 21 post on the university's cooperative extension's website.

It's not the first time Hampton Roads has dealt with a strawberry disease, but this one could have a major impact on growers who count on the popularity of the fruit.

"That's a major crop that draws the consumers to the farms," said Jayesh Samtani, associate professor and small fruit extension specialist at the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center. "It's the first crop that gives you fruit in the spring season."

The disease can reduce a grower's harvest by as much as 50%, Samtani said.

"It's scary for sure," said Roy Flanagan, Virginia Beach's agricultural extension agent and owner of Flanagan Farms, which offers u-pick strawberries in the spring. "It's a new enemy of the plant that you've got to figure out to combat."

Virginia Beach is the commonwealth's largest producer of strawberries thanks to the area's temperate climate and nutrient-rich soil. The value of the crop in Virginia Beach ranges from \$750,000 to \$1 million per year.

Meanwhile, a strawberry [farm](#) in Virginia Beach sees an estimated 1,500 visitors each week in May, according to the city.

Some area farms were able to order healthy cutoffs, or bare root plants, from California this year before they sold out, according to Samtani. Flanagan Farms and Cullipher Farm are among those. Others will take the risk with the Canadian plants or cancel their orders.

The situation will likely have long-lasting repercussions.

"The disease has a tendency to stay in the soil from one season to another," Samtani said. "Even next year, if your plants come in clean, it would not be advisable to use the same site."

Cindy Weatherly, who operates a farm in Pungo and Cindy's Produce, a farm stand on Harpers Road, will skip growing strawberries this year to avoid contamination.

"This is an aggressive strain," Weatherly said. "I don't want to introduce a disease into my soil that I know nothing about until I watch someone else take care of it."

To help stave off the disease, which thrives in warm climates, some growers will receive their plants a little later than normal, Samtani said. Strawberries in southeast Virginia are typically planted from last week of September through the first week of October. Chandler, Sweet Charlie, and Ruby June varieties are mostly grown locally.

Samtani plants berries at the research center each year. He's expecting strawberry plants to arrive Oct. 10.

The Henley family is one of the city's largest strawberry producers, growing them across 10 acres. They received the tips of [strawberry](#)

plants from a supplier in Nova Scotia and have been rooting them in trays, said farm owner Barbara Henley. She's already noticed some signs of the disease in one of the varieties, but is on track to plant in three weeks.

"Ours look fairly good," Henley said, also a City Council member. "I'm afraid to say too much."

The research center is advising growers about how to mitigate the disease if plants are infected. One option is fumigating the soil, which involves injecting a synthetic chemical gas. Sanitizing clothing, equipment, machinery and pruning tools also will be critical.

And fungicidal treatments can also help keep the disease under control. However, the most effective chemical—thiram—is being phased out by the Environmental Protection Agency, Samtani said.

Some factors, like weather, will be out of the control of growers. A dry, mild spring could keep the disease at bay.

"We don't really know what's going to happen until it all unfolds and the season progresses," Samtani said.

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Citation: Strawberry disease could threaten Hampton Roads' spring harvest (2024, September 9) retrieved 12 September 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-09-strawberry-disease-threaten-hampton-roads.html>

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