

Glimmer of hope as Italy battles 'olive tree leprosy'

31 July 2019, by Charles Onians



Xylella fastidiosa has devastated ancient olive trees in Italy's southern Apulia region and beyond since 2013, leaving thousands of skeleton-like trees in its wake, and little hope for farmers

Working in an arid Italian field of crumbly soil, agronomists are battling a rampant bacterium that has already infected millions of olive trees and could threaten the entire Mediterranean basin.

Xylella fastidiosa, which has no known cure, has devastated ancient [olive trees](#) in Italy's southern Apulia region and beyond, causing 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) of damage to the world's second olive oil exporter after Spain.

Since 2013, the disease has torn through Apulia's [olive groves](#), leaving thousands of skeleton-like [trees](#) in its wake, and little hope for farmers.

Once Xylella fastidiosa bacteria—carried by tiny sap-sucking insects known as spittlebugs—take hold, blocking the tree's ability to absorb water, the plant is doomed.

Bureaucracy and 'mafia'

The only way to fight the spread of the disease, known as "olive tree leprosy", is to destroy diseased trees, but farmers must seek special permission and say the authorities are not always forthcoming.

Doubtful of conspiracy theories that the mafia are killing trees to make way for hotel construction, agronomist Pierfederico La Notte noticed that some trees seemed not to become infected, standing tall and green in otherwise devastated fields.

Suspecting that they may be resistant varieties that can develop the disease to a small degree but continue to grow and flower, the soft-spoken researcher rapidly identified two that appeared to suffer little from Xylella.

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