HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CITRUS CANKER PUTS CROPS IN JEOPARDY

It seemed inevitable, but the news is still alarming: Citrus canker was found in Osceola County this month. Citrus canker poses a serious threat to the Florida citrus industry. Eradication is the only known cure, and with proper action it can be accomplished. However, everyone needs to do their part in helping to eliminate this disease from Osceola County and Florida.

Citrus canker (Xanthomonas campestris) is a devastating bacterium that was first detected on a homeowner's citrus trees in Miami-Dade County in 1995. Since then the disease has spread into commercial groves throughout Southwest Florida and recently into Central Florida. More than 2 million citrus trees have been destroyed statewide in eradication efforts, 60,000 of them on residential property.

A highly contagious disease, citrus canker can spread rapidly over short distances. It can be spread by wind-driven rain, overhead irrigation, flooding, insects and birds. The recent hurricanes may have spread the canker, but in the past the spread of this disease, especially over long distances, has been mainly through the transporting of plants.

The symptoms of citrus canker can be found on the fruit, leaves and twigs of infested plants. Symptoms appear typically as small, round, blisterlike formations called lesions. As the lesions age, they become brown with a water-soaked margin, often surrounded by a yellow halo. Under optimum conditions, lesions can form seven to 14 days after infection. Severe effects include defoliation, severely blemished fruit, reduced fruit quality and premature fruit drop.

Florida has no experience with effective controls of the disease other than eradication. Without eradication; citrus canker will become endemic in Florida and have a devastating effect on citrus growers, the agricultural industry and the economy. The citrus industry will be forced to manage citrus canker, costing growers significantly.

If the eradication of citrus canker fails, control programs similar to those used in other countries (Argentina, for example) will be needed. Additional capital investment and sanitation costs, an increase in export inspections, and fruit loss to the disease will greatly increase grower costs.

University of Florida/IFAS specialists have determined that citrus costs would almost double per acre for growers. Higher costs would filter down to the consumer. Fresh citrus costs, fresh juice costs and juice-from-concentrate costs all would increase.

Federal and state officials direct the Citrus Canker Eradication Program in Florida. It involves finding diseased trees, then destroying all diseased and exposed trees within a 1,900-foot radius. Homeowners who don't comply could be fined up to $1,000. Offenses include transporting citrus in or out of quarantine areas, and replanting citrus trees while under quarantine.

Loss of residential citrus trees is covered under Florida's canopy replacement program. Homeowners who lose citrus trees due to canker are eligible for a $100 voucher that can be used to buy non-citrus trees, shrubs or other landscape plants.

The quarantine areas in Osceola County have not been determined yet. Further testing is needed to find how far the canker infestation - originally found in Buenaventura Lakes - has spread.

Anyone working with citrus trees, such as landscapers and lawn-maintenance crews, will be required to
use decontamination practices while moving in and out of the area.

Be courteous to the federal and state officials who are working to eradicate this disease. Cooperate with them. Eradication of citrus canker is imperative for the well-being of this state and for you, the consumers. Agriculture is the second-largest industry in the state (behind tourism), and we need to protect it.

Because of the outbreak, the Master Gardeners and the Extension Service request that you do not bring citrus plants into our office for diagnosis.

We will accept photographs of problems for diagnosis. If you think your citrus tree may have citrus canker, call the Florida Department of Agriculture's Citrus Canker Hotline at 1-800-282-5153.

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