

DISEASE DILEMMA

As we were putting together the March issue of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, the news came about an outbreak of *Ralstonia solanacearum* biovar 3 race 2 (southern bacterial wilt) on geraniums. While this is a pretty devastating disease and was of considerable concern to commercial growers, we opted not to cover the story in *Lawn & Garden Retailer* in an effort not to cause wider spread panic. A phone call I received yesterday has caused me to reconsider that position.

You see, my sister, who is an avid gardener, called yesterday to get my advice on a family argument. It seems that one of our aunts, who works at the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, heard about the *Ralstonia* problem and was warning of a serious geranium shortage this summer. After I assured my sister that she shouldn't have any problem finding geraniums at regular price, I started wondering who else had heard of and was worried about potential shortages.

All concerned parties have handled this problem better than could be expected, but the news was still picked up in by local newspapers and has obviously made its way to the gardening public. I decided that a little information might cause prevention instead of panic.

THE FACTS

Similar to more commonly occurring bacterial wilts, such as *Xanthomonas*, this strain of *Ralstonia* is not endemic to the United States and has, so far, not established itself here, which is why this occurrence was of such interest to commercial growers. The other reason for the elevated interest is that this *Ralstonia* is listed in the Agricultural Bioterrorism Protection Act of 2002 as "potentially posing a severe threat to plant health or plant products" because of its effect on potatoes, tomatoes and tobacco.

This outbreak originated from a minor infestation of seven confirmed 'Americana Dark Red' geranium stock plants in Goldsmith Plants' Kenyan facility. Less than 100 cuttings were taken from the contaminated stock and unintentionally introduced into the United States in a routine shipment to rooting stations. Cuttings were rooted for five weeks and subsequently shipped to customers, causing co-mingling and possible spread to uninfected plants.

The USDA has subsequently stopped all geranium shipments from Kenya to the United States and has quarantined as many as 800 greenhouses until geraniums can be proven disease free.

To the best knowledge of both the greenhouse industry and the USDA, the disease is under control, and while there have been as many as several hundred thousand geranium cuttings or plants lost (because of both mandate and overreaction), there are more than enough geraniums currently in production to satisfy consumer demand.

The entire floriculture industry, from breeder to grower to allied associations and trades, has acted quickly and decisively to control this problem with the least amount of exposure and hassle. But that doesn't mean that independent garden centers should not be ready to answer questions or to counter-act rumors. If you would like more information about this disease, the industry's progress con-

taining it or how you might be effected, I suggest that you log onto www.safnow.org, but the best thing you can pass on to your customers — reassurance — will come from you and your well-trained staff. ☘



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