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HOMESTEAD

## Fast-moving fungus threatens South Florida avocado trees

South Florida avocado trees are in danger from attack by fast-moving fungus found in Homestead.

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A tree-killing fungus has made its way down to Homestead from Georgia and is now threatening avocado trees countywide.

According to state agriculture officials, the disease could harm South Florida's \$12.7 million avocado industry and kill trees that have become a staple of Miami backyards.

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services spokesman Mark Fagan's description of the situation was grim and concise.

"At this point, if your tree becomes infected, it will die," he said.

Scientists recently discovered a case of laurel wilt disease, which is carried by the redbay ambrosia beetle, in an avocado sample taken from a grove in Homestead.

The fungus kills trees in the laurel family -- such as redbay and avocado -- by infecting the sapwood, which in turn restricts the flow of water and causes leaves to wilt.

The case discovered last week marks the first time laurel wilt has been found in an area of commercial avocado crops.

The deadly disease threatens South Florida's lucrative avocado industry, which makes up an estimated 6,500 acres in Miami-Dade County, according to the state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

The agency announced Friday that four other samples showed signs of laurel wilt, but the presence of the disease in those samples has not yet been confirmed.

Agency officials hope to halt the spread of the disease by urging Miami-Dade residents to not transport any avocado, sassafras, redbay, swamp bay, pondberry or pondspice trees unless they are purchased directly from a registered nursery.

*Residents who suspect their trees may be infected are urged to contact the agency's Division of Plant Industry at 888-397-1517.*

## **Fungus plaguing avocado trees found in S. Fla.**

**The Associated Press**

HOMESTEAD, Fla. -- State officials say a fungus that plagues avocado trees has been found in South Florida.

Laurel wilt is a fungal disease carried by a type of beetle. Agriculture officials say it's been confirmed in a Homestead avocado tree and is suspected in three other groves in Miami-Dade County.

The disease was first detected near Savannah, Ga., and is believed to have been spread to the U.S. from Southeast Asia. Since, it has appeared in residential avocado trees in Jacksonville and Okeechobee County.

Laurel wilt clogs a tree's system for transporting water and nutrients, causing the leaves to wilt and the tree to die.

Florida is the country's second-largest avocado producer.