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AGRICULTURE

New threat arrives: 'citrus greening'

The newest threat to the state's multibillion-dollar commercial citrus industry is a bacterial disease spread by an Asian insect that has begun to spread.

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Florida citrus growers like Nat Roberts have a lot riding on the efforts of agricultural scientists who are scrambling to find a way to fight "citrus greening," a potentially crippling new threat that has shown up in the state's commercial citrus belt.

Two of Roberts' commercial trees, a Minneola and a tangerine, in Palm Beach County, have been hit by the disease, a bacteria carried by a tiny insect called the Asian citrus psyllid.

The insect was first spotted in Florida in 1998. But the disease was first found in Miami-Dade County in early September.

When the disease attacks a tree, fruit loses its flavor and becomes inedible. The fruit stays green on the bottom and may develop a faint mottling. The tree dies within three to five years.

"Citrus greening is considered to be one of the most serious citrus diseases in the world," Richard Gaskalla, director of the state's Division of Plant Industry, said in a letter to Florida nursery owners this month.

Since late August, officials with the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services say they have found 175 citrus trees with disease, nearly all in residential yards in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, said agency spokesperson Denise Feiber. But inspectors have also found the disease in two commercial groves, Robert's and one in Hendry County.

Feiber said the state has begun an extensive survey for the disease, including having canker inspectors look for greening as well.

Roberts' groves were hit with punishing hurricanes that ripped much of the fruit off the trees last year. This year brought an outbreak of citrus canker -- and now, citrus greening.

"Bad news," Roberts said of greening. "Something I've got to understand, learn more about. But it is not my on-the-deck fire drill. Canker is something I must deal with right now."

A team of scientists began working on a greening eradication plan last week and discussion of the disease has been added to the agenda of an international symposium on citrus canker in Orlando next month. Officials are optimistic they can control citrus greening, perhaps by killing the psyllid with an insect spray.

"It is serious because it is a disease for which there is no known cure," said Craig Meyer, deputy commissioner of agriculture.

"Left unchecked, I think it would wipe out citrus."

It may be possible to spray for the psyllid, Meyer said, but how often, and with what chemical, still has to be worked out. Another problem is that the disease can be dormant in a tree as long as two or three years.

Every citrus tree, residential or commercial, found to have the disease must be destroyed, but there are no plans to remove nearby trees as in the controversial citrus canker eradication program, in which every citrus tree within 1,900 feet of an infected one is destroyed.

"Canker gets spread in hurricanes mostly and I can't control that," Roberts said, "but we believe we may be able to control psyllids to some degree."

"The question is, have we been living with it for a little longer than we think?" Roberts asked. "I don't know. But before we all run to panic and burn the place down we need to let the scientists have a little bit of time to get their hands around it."

Citrus experts are not sure precisely how or when a tree infected with greening got into the country.

Greening is "not a death knell," Meyer said. "It is just one more thing that is going to change what the citrus industry is going to look like in the future."