Metroland ONLINE
THE ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLY OF NEW YORK'S CAPITAL REGION.

THIS WEEK'S FOOD REVIEW

Goodbye, Tomatoes

As the “late blight” fungus ravages tomato and potato crops in the Northeast, growers prepare for a meager harvest

By Amy Halloran

Photo: Alicia Solsman

‘There ought to be a lawsuit,” says Seth Jacobs, arranging lettuce Saturday at the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market. Flats of tomatoes—beautiful, bulbous orange and red heirlooms—were stacked on a table nearby. Jacobs’ Slack Hollow Farms still has tomatoes, but many of his neighbors in Washington County and at the market do not, thanks to late blight, which came early this year and has devastated tomato and potato crops throughout the Northeast.

There is nothing new about late blight, a strain of which caused the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s. However, while professional growers and informed backyard gardeners can anticipate getting hit with the fungus in September, this season the natural wrath came early, and hit tremendously hard. Late blight is an airborne pathogen that spreads fast and furious once it takes hold, and treatments, organic and nonorganic, can only control the progression of the disease, not cure it.

Conditions were perfect this year for the blight, with two very wet months in June and July. Yet, many are speculating that weather alone is not to blame. Spring shipments of seedlings from Southern growers to big-box stores like Home Depot and Wal-Mart proved to be infected with the fungus; Bonnie Greenhouses, a major national plant distributor, recalled all remaining seedlings late in June.

“It was never confirmed to have only come in on those seedlings,” says Jessica Chittenden, spokeswoman for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. “We were finding late blight that was in fields started from seed as well. From our assessment, it’s difficult to say that it’s coming from one source. The plants were asymptomatic when sold and put in the ground. The state does inspect plants coming into the state and makes sure they are grown at certified operations.”

While Ag & Markets is cautious about extending blame, an Op-Ed piece by chef Dan Barber in Sunday’s *New York Times* pointed a finger at home gardeners who bought plants from “industrial breeding operations” in the South and planted the time-bomb seedlings. Barber also lamented a lack of funding for inspections by agricultural entities that could help control the spread of this and other botanical threats.

“If people just bought their seedlings locally we wouldn’t have this problem,” says David Chinery, echoing another of Barber’s suggestions. Chinery is the agricultural and horticultural issue leader at Cornell Cooperative Extension in Rensselaer County.

High food prices, outbreaks of E. coli- and salmonella-infected vegetables, and Michelle Obama's vegetable garden on the White House lawn inspired many people this year to try their hand at backyard or community gardens. Regardless of who is responsible, the problem remains, and this is a harsh economic blow to an industry that operates on marginal profits.

Photo: Alicia Solsman

"There's very few growers that are escaping late blight in tomatoes at least," says Chuck Bornt, regional vegetable specialist for Cornell Cooperative Extension. "Some plantings have been pretty much wiped out. Tomatoes generally are one of the highest-earning crops that we grow here in the Northeast. They're a large percentage of our direct market sales, and a decent wholesale market as well." Bornt emphasizes that the tomatoes you see for sale are safe to eat; late blight is harmful to plants but not to people.

Jen Ward, of Our Farm in Easton, has tomatoes for sale at the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market. Those tomatoes came from a hundred plants that are in a hoop house—a kind of greenhouse—she uses to get her season started. The eight hundred plants she had outdoors are gone, a history of possibility.

"Most of the tomatoes we've been getting have been coming out of greenhouses," says Gayle Anderson, local produce buyer for Honest Weight Food Coop. "We haven't hardly seen tomatoes other than that. It's a calamity, total calamity. We sell a million tomato plants in the spring, from people who put in a few plants to somebody who put in 35—and his potatoes and canning tomatoes are gone. Even before the blight issue there was the rain and hail, which decimates plantings."

Anderson's personal plantings didn't survive the blight, and she grew hers from seed. She's focusing on preserving the foods that were successful this year, such as green beans and squashes, but not everyone is as sanguine.

"At first I was unfamiliar with what was going on," says Willy Lawson, who grows at the Garland Street Garden, a site prepared and maintained by Capital District Community Gardens. "I thought it was too much water, so I just picked the bad ones off. When I heard the news on the television, I pulled up the whole plant. It was disappointing. The tomatoes were full, quite a few tomatoes on each bush."

The Community Gardens has 46 sites in Rensselaer, Albany and Schenectady counties, and they've asked their gardeners, who number more than 3,000, to pull all of their tomato and potato plants. At their big gardens, such as the two-acre Normanskill Garden, the impact is huge and visible.

"At first we weren't sure whether it was going to really hit the gardens, and to what extent, but it has hit every one of our gardens and decimated all of our tomatoes, and just about all of the potatoes," says director Amy Klein.

The organization was initially cautious, but is now aggressively attacking the issue and investigating how to best protect the gardens next year. Protection means disposing of plants rather than composting them, and removing all potatoes and potato plants this year and next. While the virus needs a living host, and cannot survive independently in the soil, it can cling to potatoes.

"What we're looking for is community gardeners to be vigilant next year about potato volunteers that come up, and remove them," says Klein. "The issue is wintering over in the tubers that are left behind, because it is impossible to get every last potato, as hard as you dig. We have a crew out right now at Livingston Avenue Gardens, behind the Tivoli Apartments. I can't remember how many pounds of potatoes high-school students planted as part of the Produce Project. [The potatoes were to be sold to area restaurants.] They're going to be out there for a while."