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Stuart tree catches attention of citrus greening investigators

By **Kate Grusich**
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October 13, 2005

As state and federal surveyors conduct a meticulous search for evidence of citrus greening, some eyes are now on the Treasure Coast.

Although there is no proof the devastating plant disease has yet spread to the region, officials say at least one tree — located near Stuart — might be cause for concern.

"So far, we have found one suspect residential tree in the survey," said Denise Feiber, spokeswoman for the Florida Division of Plant Industry. "But the inspectors collect anything that looks suspicious. There are so many things that look like greening, it could be anything. We won't know until the results are back."

Either way, the news has many area citrus leaders feeling increasingly anxious.

Citrus greening, or huanglongbing, is a bacteria — classified as a biological threat by the Department of Homeland Security — that attacks the vascular system of plants. Once infected, there is no cure.

It's transmitted primarily by insects known as citrus psyllids, whose presence in the United States was first detected in Delray Beach in June 1998. But the first sign of infected trees was only a month ago, when a half-dozen trees in Miami-Dade County were found to have the disease.

Citrus greening's spread has rendered yet another blow to the beleaguered citrus industry — still reeling from last year's hurricanes and an outbreak of canker.

Canker, another plant disease, was detected in December on residential trees in St. Lucie County after hurricanes Frances and Jeanne battered the region. Since then, canker-infected trees have been found in commercial groves around the Treasure Coast.

Citrus greening, however, trumps the canker disease by a long shot.

It causes premature fruit drop and discoloring and produces citrus that is often lopsided and inedible. Trees wither and die within years. The only known way to eradicate greening is to burn trees.

"It's just numbing," said Doug Bournique, executive director of the Vero Beach-based Indian River Citrus League. "This is a really tough scenario. If there is greening, we need swift action to get in there and remove these trees as quickly as possible."

Feiber said an expert team of scientists and regulators has been pounding the pavement over the past month to identify — and restrict — the number of infections.

"Once we find a positive sample, we go five miles from there and survey that area," she said. "When we find another positive sample, we go another five miles.... It's a brand new disease to the U.S. So once we know what we're dealing with, we can start to put our control approach into place."

Crews already have taken more than 1,200 samples. Of that, 152 trees have tested positive for citrus greening thus far — all in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. A number of suspicious trees have been identified in Palm Beach County, but as in Martin County, testing is still under way, Feiber said.

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