Potato Blight



Potato Blight – The Facts

Potato blight is one of the worst disease problems for the potato grower. It can wipe out the plants almost overnight and, worse still, it can infect the tubers causing them to rot in storage. In a sack, it will travel from potato to potato ruining the lot. It will also infect Tomato plants.

What Causes Potato Blight?

Potato Blight is caused by a fungus Phytophthora infestans which spreads through the air and develops when the weather conditions are warm and humid. On an allotment site, it will quickly spread through the area so everyone needs to be alert to this disease.

Get an Alert When Blight Hits Your Area

Blight infection is dependent on a specific combination of temperature and humidity know as a **"Smith period**" which is 2 consecutive days where the temperature is above 10°C and the relative humidity exceeds 90% for at least 11 hours on each of these 2 days. However, any period of warm, humid weather increases blight risk.

Due to the predictability of Smith Periods, the Potato Council is able to issue warnings when blight should appear – log on to www.blightwatch.co.uk to register and receive this warning either by email or on your mobile phone.

Symptoms of Potato Blight

The first thing you may notice are brown freckles on the leaves or sections of leaves with brown patches and a sort of yellowish border spreading from the brown patch. In a severe attack your crop may develop into a rotting mass. Brown patches also appear on potato stems.

Tubers (the actual potato) affected by potato blight will have dark patches on the skin. Cutting the potato in half will reveal brownish rot spreading down from the skin. Later, the entire potato will turn into a soggy, foul-smelling mess.

Prevention of Potato Blight

There is no cure for blight so employ crop rotation (ideally over a 4-year period) so that potatoes aren't grown in the same ground as the previous year. Earth up potatoes so that the disease has further to travel to reach the tubers from infected foliage. Avoid wetting the foliage if watering the crop.

The only chemical treatment available to gardeners as a preventative measure is Bordeaux mixture, but the best course of action is to check your crop daily. At the first sign of blight, remove all infected leaves and cut down the stems, if infected, to prevent blight reaching the tubers - burn this or place in your domestic garden waste bin.

Other actions to help prevent potato blight

Try to get all the potatoes out from the ground when you harvest, so that you don't leave any possible infected tubers on your plot, but avoid harvesting when the soil is wet, as any live spores will be washed into the soil.

Leave the crop alone for at least two weeks to let the blight spores on the surface die off and the skins have time to harden.

After harvest, check regularly for signs of blight and remove any suspect tubers at once from your store.