

Hazelnut growers use several tools to fight EFB

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

Jeff Newton, manager of Christensen Farms' 700 acres of hazelnut trees, looks at the sky hopefully and says he wishes for a few dry days.

If the dry days come, you'll find him directing spraying from helicopters, airplanes and ground rigs, a routine he'll

continue every two weeks until the trees completely leaf out.

Fungicides are among several lines of defense against the Eastern Filbert Blight, a fungus that weakens and eventually kills productivity in hazelnut trees. The blight has been hitting Oregon orchards for decades, but his have been hardest hit in the past five years, Newton said.

Spraying is not the only defense. New resistant varieties, developed by Oregon State University and released in 2012, are showing promise in the ground. There are also some older, experimental Jefferson trees growing on Christensen property that are doing fine.

"But they're resistant, not immune," Newton said, walk-

ing through young orchards, the new Jefferson and McDonald trees now in their second leaf. After just one year in the ground, both varieties are showing signs of blight attack, but, unlike his Barcelona variety trees, blight pustules appear but don't seem to spread on the Jefferson variety. Instead, an injury will appear, but quickly heals over, leaving nothing but a small scar. Whether that scar is hiding the fungus that could impact production down the road remains to be seen, said Newton. Still, he spent his winter planting hundreds of acres of the five resistant varieties, replacing the weakening Barcelona trees that make up most of Oregon's market — for now.

Newton and OSU researchers are carefully watching all of the new resistant varieties as they leaf out this year, including orchards planted to Dorris, Yamhill and Wepster varieties.

New varieties are not Newton's only line of defense. Hard pruning is another. When older trees — the trees he manages are from one to more than 50 years old — Newton's crew



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press
Eastern Filbert Blight, the bane of Oregon's industry, infects young leaves and branches with pustules that leave tell-tale scars, according to hazelnut manager Jeff Newton. Growers use several tools to stave off EFB.

begins cutting out the infected branches to stop the spreading. The blight infects young leaves and stems as it travels through wind and rain.

Eventually, the infected tree will weaken, even with pruning, but long before that, production will decrease, the infected tree will be removed and a new tree will take its place.

The past five years have especially taken a toll on the or-

chards he manages, which are scattered throughout Yamhill and Polk counties in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Isolated Buell, halfway to the coast on Highway 22, was the last orchard to be hit with the blight.

Oregon's battle with the blight might have destroyed the market if freezing disaster had not struck a few years ago in Turkey, which produces most of the world's hazelnuts. Scarcity in the world market pushed up Oregon's nut prices, inspiring other growers — both new and experienced — to plant more hazelnuts.

New acreage, spraying, pruning and resistant varieties have combined to stave off the economic impact of the fungus, although there's still an expected shortage until the new nuts come online.

According to National Agricultural Statistics Service counts, there were nearly 30,000 acres in production (of 45,000 planted) in both 2002 and 2014.

Despite the blight, the industry is holding on, averaging nearly \$70 million in sales each of the last few years.

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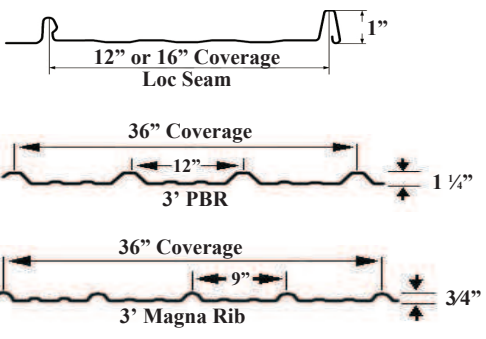
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