Penn State Team Wins Awards For Plum Pox Disease Response

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — A Penn State extension and research program developed in response to an outbreak of plum pox — a viral disease of peaches and other stone fruits — has been recognized with Awards of Excellence from both the Northeast Extension Directors and the Northeast Experiment Station Directors.

"The plum pox initiative is a great example of extension and research partnering with government agencies and producers to address a critical, potentially devastating problem," said Theodore Alter, director of Penn State Cooperative Extension and associate dean in the College of Agricultural Sciences. Alter noted that the Northeast Extension Directors nominated 17 programs in 13 states for recognition, and only two received that group's Award of Excellence.

In 1999, the plum pox virus, also known as sharka, was discovered for the first time in North America in Adams County, the top fruit-producing county in Pennsylvania. Spread by aphids, the virus causes round spots on fruit, leaves, stems and seeds. The disease does not kill trees and is harmless to humans, but it makes fruit unmarketable and drastically reduces yields. Left unchecked it could devastate Pennsylvania's $25-million-a-year stone fruit industry.

Infected trees must be destroyed to prevent the disease from spreading. As part of the plum pox eradication effort, more than one-third of Adams County's peach and nectarine acreage was taken out of production, and a quarantine was imposed on the movement of susceptible trees and propagation material within or from the affected area.

Shortly after the disease was identified in Pennsylvania, Penn State Cooperative Extension educators and College of Agricultural Sciences researchers joined forces with the state and federal departments of agriculture, growers' associations, legislators and community leaders to develop a rapid-response research and educational program.

In December 1999, Penn State teamed with the federal and state agriculture departments to organize a plum pox symposium, which brought in European scientists to share their knowledge and experience in fighting the virus.

Over the next year, Penn State held a series of educational meetings and seminars for growers, extension agents, researchers and the public, focusing on plum pox identification and management.

Penn State Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners helped survey and educate homeowners and backyard fruit growers in the quarantine area, and Penn State personnel were guests on numerous radio and television programs covering the plum pox situation. Educational materials also were developed, including a video, a World Wide Web site (http://sharka.cas.psu.edu) and an eight-page, full-color pamphlet.

All these efforts, combined with the work of Penn State agricultural economists in assessing the economic impact of the outbreak, helped lead to a state- and federally supported indemnification program to help offset growers' costs for destruction of trees and lost production. The program also provided information that led Canadian officials to the discovery of plum pox on the Niagara Peninsula.

"This program has done a great deal to blunt the impact of a very damaging disease," said Paul Backman, director of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Experiment Station and associate dean for research in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. "As a result of this collaborative effort, there are strong prospects of eliminating the plum pox virus from the United States."

Members of the project team, listed alphabetically, are plant pathologist Herbert Cole, professor of agricultural sciences; Thomas Garretson, fruit integrated pest management extension agent in Adams County; Frederick Gildow, professor of plant pathology; John Halbrendt, associate professor of plant pathology; Jayson Harper, associate professor of agricultural economics; Larry Hull, professor of entomology and scientist-in-charge of Penn State's Fruit Research and Extension Center in Biglerville; Lynn Kime, ag economic development extension agent in Adams County; William Kleiner, county extension director and fruit extension agent in Adams County; Greg Krawczyk, entomology research associate; and James Travis, professor of plant pathology extension.

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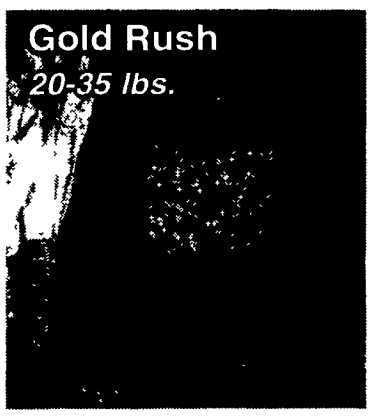

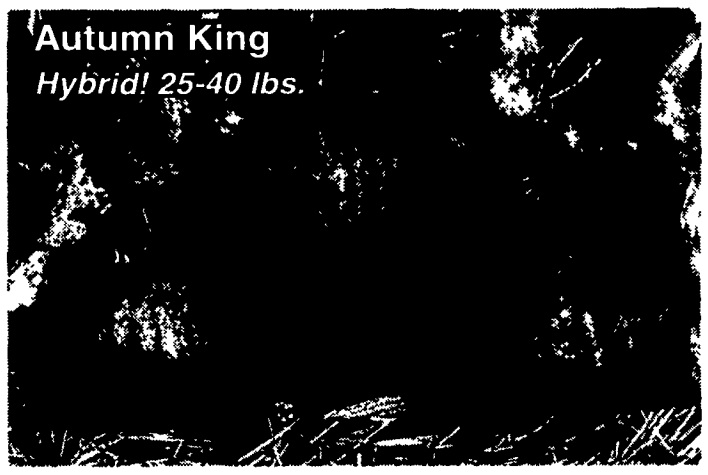

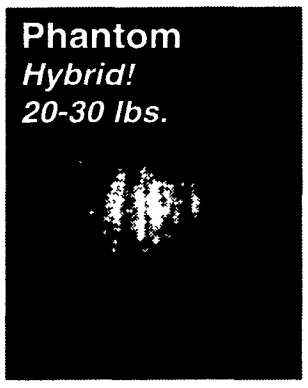

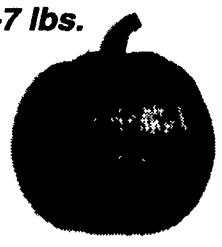

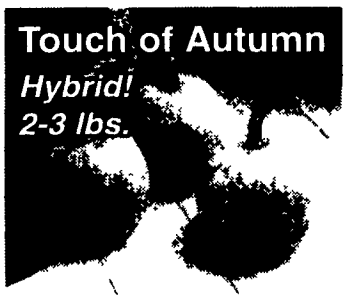

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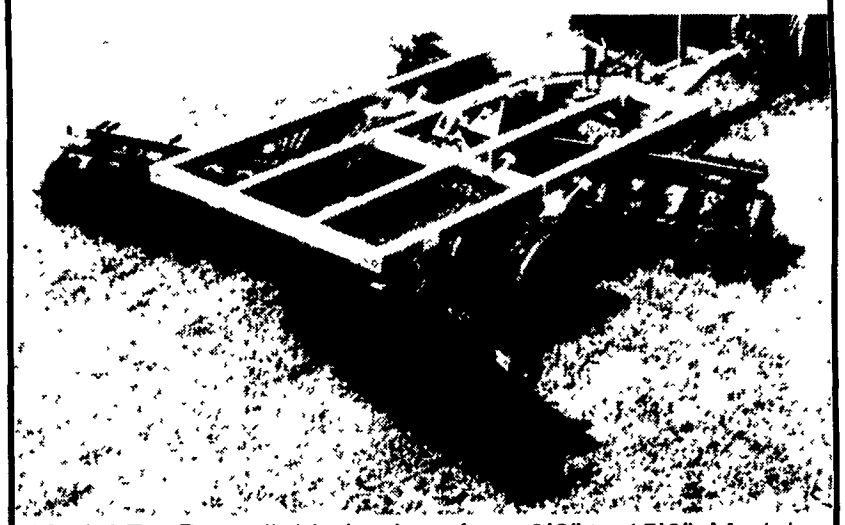

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