

PHYTOPHTHORA LATERALIS DISAPPEARS FROM THE RADAR



Phytophthora lateralis first appeared in 2010 on Lawson's cypress which is the most widely traded and planted conifer in the UK landscape. It was initially treated with great concern by UK plant health authorities but arrival of Chalara fraxinea put paid to that. P. lateralis disappeared from the radar in 2012 when UK government 'drew a line in the sand' following the unprecedented public outcry over Chalara ash dieback.

P. lateralis now goes unreported outside the confines of obscure government reports. How it entered the UK is portrayed as a mystery but the avenues of entry are clear to me. Root cause is the British passion for importing and planting trees without proper attention paid to the integrity of the planting material.

Foliar browning symptoms in Lawson's cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*) at Balloch Country Park Estate in Scotland and caused by P. lateralis were apparent in 2009 and worsened during 2010. Forestry Commission (FC) waited until November 2010 to report finding P. lateralis.

Infrastructure development at Balloch Country Park Estate involving Rhododendron clearance, a major replanting programme using 'imported' topsoil, and financed by a £2.4 m Heritage Lottery Fund grant, had taken place in 2003-2006. Tree and shrub planting material was sourced from a number of nurseries including 10 in the Netherlands, four in Italy and two in France. P. lateralis had been confirmed in French nurseries in 1999 and Dutch nurseries in 2004.

Further UK outbreaks were confirmed on Lawson's cypress at Greenock Park Cemetery and on Thuja occidentalis (Northern white cedar) at a Scottish nursery and a Renfrewshire Park. The Northern white cedar trees had been imported from France. At least two

different genetic lineages have since been identified indicating separate UK introductions of the pathogen.

The outbreak of P. lateralis at Balloch Country Park Estate was followed by a flurry of more highly publicised findings in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, including Yorkshire and Devon, in 2011. But with no public utterances from FC or Fera during the whole of 2012 and 2013 (just a website mention in passing of one outbreak in South Wales and one in Sussex) it would appear P. lateralis is no longer considered to be a problem.

P. lateralis may have disappeared from the radar screen but with a spore dissemination potential equivalent to Phytophthora ramorum, and a history of air-borne spore spread in France, it has certainly not gone away. What has disappeared is UK plant health authorities' earlier concern and consideration for an aggressive and lethal disease of conifer species vital to the landscape, amenity and garden sectors.

Management guidance has been effectively downgraded. FC now says suspected cases should only be reported to them if they involve a number of trees on a public site such as a park or churchyard, on the basis that large numbers of visitors will pose a higher risk of spreading the disease. For suspected cases in private gardens (and presumably golf courses) owners are told to consult a reputable arborist, leaving the arborist to decide on and organise safe disposal and

destruction of infected material (by burning or chipping and deep burial) and preferably on site.

In the absence of legal permission for burning large amounts of debris on site, or the facilities for deep burial, then the arborist is forced to take the contaminated debris away, risking spread of disease to other customers and his/her reputation as a 'reputable' arborist. There is as much if not more risk of disease spread by forcing a large number of small-scale arborists, mostly doing domestic work, to deal with this particular disease without proper intervention or at least guidance from the centre.

After all Lawson's cypress is the most widely planted conifer in the UK landscape, amenity and garden sectors and P. lateralis a highly infective pathogen. This is another example of UK plant health authorities not understanding the needs of the arb and amenity sectors even if they are concerned, which many the industry simply do not believe.

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