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DON'T EAT COCONUTS FROM TREES TREATED FOR LETHAL YELLOWING

By: Chuck Woods

Please don't eat the coconuts. That's the advice of a University of Florida palm expert who warns that coconuts from trees treated with antibiotics to stop lethal yellowing could be hazardous to your health.

With the recent outbreak of the palm disease in southwest Florida, many cities and homeowners are injecting palms with oxytetracycline, a drug that causes resistance to the disease as long as the treatment is repeated every three or four months. And now there's concern about the safety of eating coconuts from these injected palms.

"For a normal person, eating coconuts from palms that have been injected with oxytetracycline would have no effect on that person. But some people can have allergic reactions to some antibiotics," said Dr. Henry Donselman of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) research center in Ft. Lauderdale.

"Oxytetracycline is also known to cause discoloring in the developing teeth of newborns and toddlers," he said.

"The bottom line on eating coconuts from injected palm trees is not how safe it is but the fact that it is contrary to the product label recommendations for use of the drug to prevent lethal yellowing," he explained.

He said there is a distinction between a chemical labeled for a food crop and one labeled for an ornamental crop. The use of oxytetracycline on "ornamental" palms is clearly stated on the label.

"This means we need to recognize that this is a non-food label and that coconuts from these trees are not to be used for consumption," Donselman explained.

Lethal yellowing is a serious disease that strikes the original "Jamaica Tall" coconut palms in south Florida. Although most of these palms have already died of lethal yellowing on the east coast of Florida, large numbers still remain on the west coast, particularly in Lee and Collier counties.

Donselman said injection of Jamaica Tall palms is an effective way to combat the disease. "However, to insure the continued overall tropical beauty of palms in our landscape, we need to place a strong emphasis on underplanting our existing, susceptible palms with resistant ones such as the Malayan Dwarf and hybrid Maypan.

"Not only will these add to our landscape, but they will provide us with coconuts that are perfectly safe and legal to eat," Donselman concluded. ■

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