

# Valley farmers may need genetic engineering to fight citrus pest

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Despite public concern about genetically engineered food, citrus growers should not be deterred from using the technology in the fight against a deadly disease known as Huanglongbing, several experts said Thursday.

The disease, also known as citrus greening, has ravaged Florida's citrus industry and is slowly spreading its way westward to California and the San Joaquin Valley's citrus belt.

To citrus growers, the disease and the Asian citrus psyllid -- the bug that can spread the disease - are considered major threats to the industry. There is no known cure for the disease that will cause a tree to produce misshapen and bitter-tasting fruit. Over time, the tree will die.

Scientists and researchers, who spoke at California Citrus Mutual's 2014 Citrus Showcase in Visalia, said genetic engineering may not be the sole solution to stopping the disease, but it can be a valuable option.

At the U.S. Horticultural Research Laboratory in Fort Pierce, Fla., scientists found that some citrus varieties have shown resistance to the disease. Isolating those traits will be important.

"It is a promising solution," said Ed Stover, research horticulturist at the laboratory. "And we need to have that transgenic tool."

If growers push for genetically engineered remedies, they will have to overcome the public's concerns about the technology, said Cathleen Enright, executive vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based Biotechnology Industry Organization.

Enright reminded growers that opponents of genetic modification are a formidable group, representing about 300 environmental and consumer organizations.

Still, Enright said citrus growers have a few advantages over corn and soybean farmers who use genetically engineered seed and who have been singled out by opponents.

She says, consumers easily relate to eating oranges and drinking orange juice. It is part of their daily lives. And they may understand the potential threat that citrus greening and the psyllid has on the supply of those products.

"You can't cozy up to a soybean," she said. "And my experience tells me that your story will not fall flat, it will be embraced."

Others are not sure the citrus industry is ready to push genetic engineering as an option.

Fred Gmitter, a researcher at the University of Florida, said that there is some reluctance among those in the citrus industry to use genetic engineering because of the potential backlash.

"Privately, they tell me they are not ready for a GMO product," Gmitter said. In another 50 years, acceptance of genetic engineering may be the norm, he said, "but we are not there yet."

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