

More than Roses for Valentine's Day
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Recently I read an AP News article on how US Border Patrol officers are working overtime to check shipments of roses and other flowers looking for exotic pests. Since most of the floral industry materials come from South America there is a good chance that an insect or plant disease could hitch a ride to the United States this time of the year. There are many examples of exotic pests that have hitchhiked only to cause many problems and cost millions of dollars to fight.

Around the turn of the 20th century a disease was found to be killing American chestnuts in their native range. At that time chestnut trees grew to heights of 100 feet in the Eastern US forests. The pathogen is a fungus that causes cankers on the trees which girdle and kill the portion of the tree above the canker. Current belief is that the blight came in on either Chinese or Japanese species of chestnut that are more tolerant of the fungus. The disease has virtually caused the extinction of the American chestnut.

Dutch elm disease is another disease that was brought in to the US on infected elm wood during the 1930's. This fungus is responsible for millions of American elm trees to "disappear" from urban street tree plantings. Having not come from Holland but first identified by scientists in Holland its name is misleading. It is believed to have originated in the Himalayas. Dutch elm disease continues to kill many elms each year.

An economically important insect that "hitched" a ride is the Asian longhorned beetle. This insect kills trees by burrowing into the tree as larvae and feeding on the phloem tissue. Having come from China on wood packing materials has recently been found in the US. It is a very attractive but devastating insect on maples, horsechestnut, willow, elm, poplar and a few other species. It has been found in Brooklyn and Amityville in New York and Chicago, Illinois.

Emerald ash borer is currently a hot topic in the exotic pest world. It came to the US in packing wood from Asia as well. It has the potential to kill all ash species. Currently, it has been identified in several states including; Michigan, Ohio, Maryland, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa.

An important agronomic exotic pest includes the soybean aphid. Having arrived in the US near O'Hare International airport it is believed that a traveler brought this destructive insect from Asia on soybean plants. Farmers in the Great Plains who grow soybeans have been fighting the spread of soybean aphids for several years.

Soybean rust is a disease of soybeans which can overwinter in the US on Kudzu (another exotic pest) and has the potential to whip out soybean production in the US. First identified in the US in 2004, researchers are busy studying this disease to learn how to minimize its impact if conditions are right for an epidemic.

In conclusion, only a few exotic pests have been mentioned here. In the future I anticipate more pests will be found but thankfully we have a few good men and women working hard to spot abnormal items at our borders. Keep this in mind when ordering those beautiful flowers for that special someone for Valentine's day.

If you have questions about this topic I can be reached by phone at 605-394-2188 or email to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.