

Viewpoint: GMO trees could save America's 'decimated' citrus industry from bacterial 'plague'

Farmers in the major U.S. citrus-producing regions—Florida, California, Texas and Arizona, in particular—are facing a plague of epic proportions.

Oranges and a range of other citrus fruits are being decimated by an incurable disease, a lethal, bacterial infection known as “citrus greening”—or Huanglongbing. It is spread by a tiny insect, the Asian citrus psyllid....

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There's good news from the lab, however. Researchers at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences have hit the trifecta; they've developed genetically engineered citrus trees that show not only resistance to greening but also to canker and black spot, two other perennial problems for citrus producers.

The “cure” developed by the plant biologists is ingenious. They inserted a gene isolated from the Arabidopsis plant—a member of the mustard family—to create enhanced resistance to greening and reduced disease severity. Several trees remained disease-free after 36 months in a field with a high number of diseased trees.

Nevertheless, it will be a decade or more before these disease-resistant trees have received regulatory approvals....

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