

2016 Small Grain Disease and Insect Pest Scouting Report

Dr. Heather Darby, Extension Agronomist
Dr. Ann Hazelrigg, Director, Plant Diagnostic Clinic
Erica Cummings, Crops and Soils Coordinator
Gabriella Maia, Plant Diagnostic Clinic Research Assistant
(802) 524-6501

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INTRODUCTION

A survey of small grain diseases and insect pests were conducted in Vermont, New York, and Massachusetts during the 2016 growing season. Pests were scouted on six Vermont farm locations in the towns of Alburgh, North Troy, Shelburne, Bridport, Glover, and Berlin, as well as in Essex, New York and Northfield, Massachusetts.

Winter and spring wheat (heirloom and commercially available) as well as spring barley were scouted between spike emergence and flowering, and again at the soft dough growth stage. Disease and insect samples were taken and identified with assistance from the University of Vermont (UVM) Plant Diagnostic Clinic.

DISEASES IDENTIFIED

The overall warm and dry growing conditions throughout much of the season resulted in relatively low levels of foliar diseases. The foliar and head diseases identified during the 2016 growing season are described below:

Foliar Diseases

Foliar diseases reduce photosynthetic leaf area, use nutrients, and increase respiration and transpiration within the infected plant tissues. A diseased plant typically exhibits reduced vigor, growth, and seed fill. The earlier the occurrence, the greater degree of infection, and the longer duration of conditions favorable for disease development, the yield loss will be greater. The following foliar diseases were identified during scouting visits.



Image 1. Powdery mildew on spring wheat.

Powdery mildew (*Erysiphe graminis f. sp. Tritici*) was identified on the leaves and stems of winter wheat in

Northfield, MA, on the leaves of winter wheat in Shelburne, and on the leaves of winter and spring wheat and spring barley in Alburgh, VT. Powdery mildew is relatively easy to identify, the fungus produces whitish-gray cottony growths on the upper leaf surface or stem of the infected plant (Image 1). Infection primarily occurs on the lower leaves and stem sections of the plant.

Leaf spots such as **Tan spot** (*Pyrenophora tritici-repentis*), **Septoria tritici blotch** (STB) (*Zymoseptoria tritici*) and **Stagonospora leaf and glume blotch** (*Stagonospora nodorum*) were identified at all of the on-farm sites in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York, and on all grain types

Interestingly a genetic resistance response to foliar diseases was observed on wheat at all sites (Image 5).

Grain Head Diseases

There are two primary grain head diseases found in the Northeast, **Loose smut** (*Ustilago tritici*) and **Fusarium head blight** (FHB) (*Fusarium graminearum*). Loose smut was identified at the Alburgh site on spring and winter wheat and spring barley, and on winter wheat at the Bridport and Shelburne, VT locations. The loose smut fungus is carried as dormant mycelium within healthy-looking seed and is spread by planting infected seed. A smut-infected seed and plant cannot be distinguished from an uninfected one until the head starts to emerge. The disease is most obvious just after the time of heading by the characteristic dusty black appearance of diseased heads (Image 6). The spores are dispersed by the wind during wheat flowering and can infect healthy plants.

If you find heads with loose smut in your fields, you should NOT save the seed for future planting. Loose smut is not considered a human health risk, but planting infected seed will exponentially increase diseased seed and result in yield losses.

The pathogen of most concern among grain growers is *Fusarium* head blight (FHB). It is predominantly caused by the species, *Fusarium graminearum*. This disease is very destructive and causes yield losses, low test weights, low seed germination, and contamination of grain with the mycotoxin, a vomitoxin, called deoxynivalenol (DON). The spores are usually transported by air currents and can infect plants at flowering through grain fill. Spores can also overwinter on grain stubble. A telltale sign of FHB infection is the premature bleaching of grain heads. Another symptom is a pink or orange colored mold at the base of the spikelet. Additionally, once the grains are harvested, infected kernels will be pink, white, chalky and/or shriveled. *Fusarium* can

pose a health risk to both humans and livestock. Consumption of contaminated grains at DON levels of greater than 1 ppm in humans and 10 ppm for certain livestock can cause illness; therefore, it is critically important to test grain for DON. More information on DON testing can be found at:

<http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cropsoil/cereal-grain-testing-lab>.

All on-farm locations were scouted at soft dough to assess FHB severity using the North Dakota State University visual scale. The warm and dry conditions during the 2016 growing season resulted in minimal observations of FHB infection at any of the on-farm sites and record low DON levels.

Interestingly, while scouting for FHB infection we observed incomplete grain fill of predominantly winter wheat, at several of the on-farm locations, which resulted in lower than expected yields (Image 7). This might be due to drought like conditions during grain fill.

Managing Grain Diseases

It is important to remember, we do not know directly how foliar diseases affect yields. Although we have identified these issues in the field, it is not clear as to how, or at what severity, they impact yield and quality.

In our cool, moist climate, practices that are critical to managing the multitude of diseases that impact small grains include: planting clean seed, rotating crops, and improving air flow. We

