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Why Australia needs plant quarantine

A T. Gulvin

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LATE blight of potatoes in 1830, powdery mildew of grapes in 1847, phylloxera in 1861, downy mildew in 1875, and black rot in 1888 . . . It was this grim list of plant disease epidemics in Europe that forced Governments to protect plants by quarantine.

Powdery mildew was introduced into Europe with American vines. To control powdery mildew other vines resistant to this disease were introduced from America, but they carried phylloxera. To combat phylloxera more American vines resistant to phylloxera were imported, but they brought with them downy mildew, black rot and Pierce’s disease.

In America a similar chain of events was recorded with the introduction of cottony cushion scale in 1869 from Australia, San José scale from China in 1879, pine rusts in 1883, and bacterial canker of citrus in 1912.

The list of such disasters is almost endless.

Australia is still free of many plant diseases. The introduction of new diseases and pests would not only reduce yields and increase costs, but could cause the loss of valuable markets.

For this reason, under Australia’s plant quarantine regulations all plant material is at least inspected on arrival in the country. Some of it is automatically treated, some treated only if it is found to be diseased, some is subject to very stringent restrictions and some is completely prohibited from entry.

For instance there is a long list of seeds which are prohibited except under very rigid control. The list includes cereal grain seed which could bring in serious diseases like dwarf bunt or yellow slime, with disastrous consequences. The same applies to other cereal and pasture seeds. They are all liable to carry seed-borne diseases which can only be detected after the seeds have germinated and the plants have started to grow. Therefore any of these seeds imported have to be grown in quarantine, usually in insect-proof glasshouses, where they can be carefully checked by pathologists and entomologists.

Because this procedure is very complex, approval is only given for the introduction of new improved varieties of real value to Australian agriculture.

Trees, plants, parts of plants such as cuttings or bud wood, bulbs, corms and so on are also subject to rigid control. This material, known as nursery stock, must be grown in quarantine under close supervision for a full growing season.

To ensure that thorough examination can be made for diseases during the growing period the quantities imported are restricted to those plants needed to established new varieties.

Many plants are very severely restricted. These include all fruit trees and many ornamental trees or shrubs, some of which are virtually prohibited.

Smuggling

While indiscriminate importation of plant material is not permitted there are very few plants or seeds which cannot be imported legally. Despite this, many attempts are made to smuggle plant material into Australia.

This point is well illustrated by the large amount of plant material found by inspectors in the luggage of migrants. Any of this could carry disease to the plant population.
All types of seed are found. Some are prohibited because of seed-borne disease, some cannot even be identified, some contain a mixture which could easily include noxious weed seeds and others are mixed with soil particles which also could be dangerous.

All kinds of fruit and plants are intercepted. Cuttings and bulbs are very common articles of luggage. Potatoes are often discovered, and could be carrying serious diseases such as potato blight.

Usually people bring these things in quite innocently, even though a great deal of publicity is given to our quarantine regulations. But there are also deliberate attempts to side-step the regulations and several people have been prosecuted for this in recent years.

In one instance a passenger brought in an ornamental camel saddle. When opened it was found to contain two citrus trees with soil around the roots, wrapped in dirty rag. For packing, rice straw containing seed heads was used. All told there were four prohibited imports concealed in the one saddle.

Such smuggling attempts are not only dangerous but also completely unnecessary. If the introduction of a new plant can be justified, such as when an improved variety becomes available overseas, its importation can almost certainly be arranged through the proper channels.
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