

[France](#)

Fears for olive crop force Brussels to tackle spread of leaf scorch

Xylella fastidiosa, a bacterium that kills a wide range of fruiting trees and has wiped out Italian plantations, has been identified in Paris



Workers cut down an olive tree infected with *Xylella fastidiosa* near Brindisi, southern Italy. Photograph: Gaetano Lo Porto/AP

[Kim Willsher](#) in Paris

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European agriculture experts will meet in Brussels on Monday to develop an action plan to save the continent's olive trees – and other plants – from a killer disease.

The insect-spread *Xylella fastidiosa*, also known as leaf scorch, has wiped out thousands of hectares of plantations in southern [Italy](#).

Related: [Europe's olive trees threatened by spread of deadly bacteria](#)

A [report](#) by scientists in January, published by the European Food Safety Authority, suggested the pathogen's spread and contamination in other European Union countries was very likely.

Monday's meeting was called after the bacterium was found in four ornamental coffee bushes at Rungis, the international food market on the outskirts of Paris, a fortnight ago.

The plants had been imported from Honduras via the Netherlands, the French ministry of agriculture said.

French farmers fear it is only a matter of time before the disease begins to wipe out olive trees on the Mediterranean island of Corsica and in southern [France](#).

Xylella fastidiosa, which is believed to come from South America, kills trees by cutting off the movement of water in the plants leading to leaves turning yellow and brown before they fall off. The branches follow soon afterwards. There is no known treatment or measure to protect plants.

The bacterium is spread by minuscule insects that infect trees while feeding off the leaves. In the US, the disease devastated vineyards in the 1990s, a prospect that has caused widespread alarm in France, which suffered the "great French wine blight" in the 19th century when the phylloxera aphid wiped out many vineyards and decimated the country's wine industry.

Researchers at the University of California have estimated that the disease costs the state \$104m a year in the loss of vines and citrus trees as well as research costs.

While France's olive industry has an annual turnover of €100m (£72m), its wine exports are worth €7.6bn and the industry employs almost 560,000 people.

Xylella fastidiosa has been known to attack almond, plum and laurel trees among 309 plant species.

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French Green MEP José Bové visited Corsica last week to support local farmers, and said drastic measures were needed to halt the bacterium.

“We have to organise a blockade of Corsica. Plants brought to the continent must come in through one port before being put into quarantine. At a European level, plants should be raised in sealed greenhouses,” Bové told the Journal du Dimanche (JDD).

The French government is demanding that [Europe](#) introduce measures to try to prevent the spread of the disease, including widespread testing for the bacterium and common rules governing the destruction and burning of infected plants and trees.

The French ministry of agriculture has banned imports of certain plants from contaminated regions of Italy and South America.

“More than 200 officials are on alert to test seedlings and farms and there are inspectors at 32 points of entry for these goods including airports and ports,” Emmanuelle Soubeyran, from the ministry, told the JDD. France is also seeking European money to fight the disease.

“Financial solidarity is important,” added Soubeyran. “European funds are available in the event of plant diseases. In 2012, Europe made €12m available to save threatened pine trees in Portugal and Spain. We’re confident there will be a rapid decision, everyone wants a solution.”

- This article was amended on 26 April. France’s olive industry has an annual turnover of €100m, not € 100,000.