

Watch out for alternaria

The emergence of alternaria (i.e. 'early' potato blight) in some areas during the past couple of years suggests the disease may be making something of a come-back.

"Alternaria isn't a new challenge," says potato specialist, Barrie Florendine of UAP. "It's a common problem throughout the world's potato producing countries, and it can be responsible for yield losses of up to 30%."

The disease is caused by *Alternaria alternata* and *Alternaria solani*, with the two fungi being well dispersed throughout the UK, he says. "The latter is the more damaging of the two and we've seen bad attacks in parts of Scotland and Northumberland, right down to the south of England."

Whilst it's visually impossible to tell the two alternaria species apart, he believes the re-emergence of the disease may be because agronomists are confusing it with magnesium deficiency.

"We have — believe it or not — been

experiencing a slightly warmer climate in recent years. Couple that with alternating daily periods of wet and dry weather, and you get the optimal conditions for alternaria spore production and infection.

"It's possible that we'll see more alternaria in crops this year," predicts Barrie Florendine. "Varietal selection is another key factor — we've seen a move towards highly susceptible varieties, such as Markies, in recent years along with more common varieties, such as Estima, Saturna and Maris Piper, which demonstrate a fair degree of susceptibility.

"But variety choice isn't something every grower can use to lower their alternaria risk — for example, if you're contracted to grow Markies, you can't switch." It's in these situations where fungicides are vital, he adds.

However, he warns against making wholesale changes in the overall blight control strategy, emphasising that product selection must ultimately be dictated

by late blight (*Phytophthora infestans*). "I'd simply recommend ensuring blight programmes incorporate fungicides with useful activity on alternaria."

Mancozeb previously had a very important role to play in blight control programmes, which served well in controlling alternaria, continues Barrie Florendine. "But it's since been superseded as a popular single-active treatment by a few newer products — some of which don't contain mancozeb."

He notes that Valbon (benthiavalicarb+ mancozeb) and Electis (mancozeb+ zoxamide) are two of the better late blight treatments with activity against alternaria. "Not only does their mancozeb component prove beneficial against the disease, but it's believed that both benthiavalicarb and zoxamide provide activity in their own right.

"These options can be built into late blight control programmes with Valbon offering both strong protectant and some kickback activity against late blight."