

Managing blueberry rust in a cool climate

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Blueberry rust is caused by the fungus *Thekopsora minima*. In Tasmania, blueberry rust is confined to a small number of properties in the north of the state and is being managed under a regulated containment program. Preventing blueberry rust infection is a key to limiting the spread of this disease. The key steps in preventing blueberry rust infection include good farm biosecurity and applying crop management practices that reduce the risk of infection.

KEY POINTS

- **Blueberry rust is spread** by wind, carried on people, plants and equipment.
- **Prepare a farm biosecurity plan** to manage the movement of people, plants and equipment both onto and within your orchard.
- Become familiar with blueberry rust symptoms and **monitor your crop regularly**.
- **Blueberry rust spore production and infection** is favoured by **humid conditions**, temperatures between **19° and 25°C** and may be triggered by rain.
- **Reduce humidity** within the orchard by pruning to create an open canopy, good alleyway and edge management.
- **Apply crop protectants** using a suitable product, timing and application technique to prevent infection.
- **Protect young leaves** as these are most susceptible to blueberry rust.

IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE BLUEBERRY RUST
DO NOT DISTURB OR MOVE THE PLANT
PLEASE PHONE BIOSECURITY TASMANIA ON

(03) 6165 3777

Where does blueberry rust come from?

Blueberry rust can exist exclusively on blueberries from season to season, especially if blueberries retain their leaves over winter. Internationally, alternative hosts include members of the rhododendron family and *Gaylussacia spp.* (Huckleberry). Blueberry rust can also complete its lifecycle on the alternate host (*Tsuga sp.*) particularly in cool climates. *Tsuga* are a group of conifers common in the Northern United States and Canada, but less common in Australia. Infected *Tsuga* needles can go on to re infect blueberries in the spring. In Australia blueberry rust has never been detected on alternative hosts. Similarly, in Tasmania, detections of rust in the past have only been on blueberry plants. It is not known whether the rust occurs on any alternate hosts in Tasmania so crop management is based around prevention of infection from spores produced on blueberry plants.

How is blueberry rust spread?

The disease is spread via spores carried by wind from infected plants, directly by people wearing contaminated clothing, equipment that has been in contact with infected blueberries or by introducing infected plants.

Blueberry rust symptoms

- Blueberry rust first appears as small yellow leaf spots on the upper surface of young leaves. As the disease progresses these areas turn rust brown coloured and can be surrounded by a yellow halo. (Figure 1)
- Yellow-orange powdery rust pustules develop on the underside of leaves (Figure 2)
- The telial stage (not yet observed in Tasmania) may occur at the end of the growing season and appears as dark coloured crusts on underside of leaves



Figure 1. (LEFT) Top side of leaf with blueberry rust
Figure 2. (RIGHT) Underside of leaf with blueberry rust pustules
Images courtesy Tasmanian DPIPW & NSW DPI

How can I prevent blueberry rust infection?

The first step to prevention is to have a good **farm biosecurity plan**. Resources: Farm biosecurity and National blueberry biosecurity plan. Blueberry Orchard Hygiene Guidelines published by the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries (DPIPWE) provides a good starting point. Crop management practices that help prevent blueberry rust infection can include cultural, chemical and biological practices.

Cultural management

High humidity and leaf wetness favour blueberry rust infection. **Pruning to create an open canopy can help leaves dry faster and reduce the humidity** within the bush.

Whilst good shelter is beneficial for blueberry productivity, some airflow through the canopy can help prevent disease. Keeping the inter-row alleyways mown and free of tall weeds is good practice for reducing humidity in the blueberry canopy. High density plantings may favour disease development.

Prevention is better than cure

Preventing rust with crop protectants relies on good **timing**, using an **effective product** and thorough **coverage** by good application **technique**. Once blueberry rust symptoms are obvious, management is more difficult due to the rapid production of large numbers of spores.

Timing is everything

Young leaves are most vulnerable to rust infection. Rain events appear to trigger the release of spores and also favour infection by increasing the humidity. Mild temperatures favour blueberry rust spore production and infection with temperatures in the range 19° to 25°C being highly favourable.

Time the application of protection measures, such as fungicides, to protect young leaf material when the forecast is for conditions that favour infection. If conditions are very dry or cold then the risk is lower than if conditions are humid, wet and mild.

Best product — good coverage

There are three ways you can find up to date information about chemicals that are currently registered or permitted for use on your crop:

1. Visit the free APVMA public search portal <https://portal.apvma.gov.au/pubcris>
2. Purchase an annual subscription to the Infopest service (\$55) which combines AgVet chemical information online infopest.com.au
3. Contact your Industry Development Officer

Crop protectants can only be effective when they are applied at the right rate, in the right conditions, with suitable equipment to get good coverage. Contact your local TAFE for courses on horticultural spray application.

utas.edu.au/tia

