



Invasive Garden Pests: Leek Moth

During the summer of 2009, a Plattsburgh home gardener contacted Cornell Cooperative Extension regarding an insect problem in garlic. The pest was positively identified by the USDA as leek moth (*Acrolepiopsis assectella*). This is the first positive identification of this insect in the continental United States. New York State Ag & Markets and the USDA is currently surveying the area to determine the extent of leek moth infestation.

Leek moth is a known pest of all *Allium* crops, including leek, onion, chives, green onion, shallot, garlic, elephant garlic, etc. and is considered a serious pest of these crops. The leek moth is native to Europe but can now be found in Asia, Africa, and North America. The first North American find of leek moth occurred in 1993 in Ontario Canada.

While leeks are the preferred host, all *Allium* crops will be attacked. The larvae (or caterpillars) tunnel mines into the leaf tissue causing distortion, stunted growth, and secondary bacterial and fungal infections. Damage to the leaves of leek can make them unmarketable. Most of the feeding occurs in the leaves, though feeding occasionally occurs in the bulbs. Flowers are avoided since *Allium* flowers contain saponin, a compound that inhibits the growth of insects.

The adults moths are small (approximately 1/2 inch wingspan; 1/4 inch long with wings folded at rest) reddish-brown moths with a white triangular mark on the middle of their folded wings. The hindwings of the moths are heavily fringed and are pale to dark grey in color. Adults are active at nightfall and right before dawn. Eggs are laid in the spring on leaf surfaces. The small yellowish-green caterpillars eat any cultivated onion-type plant prior to pupating in a reddish-brown netted cocoon. Most cocoons are found on the leaves but they can also be found on decaying plant matter near the crops. There can be up to three generations per year.

If you grow any of the listed crops, inspect them for damage. Look for mined holes and windows in the leaves, small caterpillars, the caterpillars droppings (frass), cocoons, or adult moths. If you suspect leek moth damage, please bring a sample to your local Cornell Cooperative Extension Office for confirmation. Infected plants can be harvested but any portion of the plant not eaten must be burned or bagged and sent to the landfill.

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