



Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Qld

Managing sweetpotato viruses in Australia

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Innovating new virus diagnostics and plant bed management in the Australian sweetpotato industry

This publication has been compiled by Sandra Dennien (Horticulture and Forestry Sciences, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries) and Craig Henderson (Henderson RDE).

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Key messages

- Sweetpotato viruses can have a major impact on the yield and quality of sweetpotatoes in Australia.
- The most critical strategy for managing sweetpotato viruses is using clean planting material sourced from a reliable supplier.
- Clean sweetpotato plants become re-infected when vectors (aphids, whiteflies, jassids) spread viruses and phytoplasma from infected plants.
- Managing sweetpotato viruses in commercial crops is about reducing the probability and rate of virus re-infection, by:
 - Starting with clean materials.
 - Being vigilant in maintaining nursery beds as virus and vector free as possible.
 - Ensure no sweetpotato plants or materials (apart from current nursery beds or growing commercial crops) exist on farm. This means removing old crops and volunteer plants, including dump sites for reject roots.
 - As far as practically possible around your farm, eliminate weeds related to sweetpotatoes, and vegetation that supports vector insects.
- Report any unusual plant symptoms to appropriate agencies, as there are important sweetpotato virus diseases not currently in Australia that could severely impact the industry.

What are plant viruses?

Plant viruses are viruses that affect plants. Sweetpotato (*Ipomoea batatas*) infecting viruses are not able to survive or multiply without a suitable host plant or vector. They are extremely small and are made up of genetic material or nucleic acid (either DNA or RNA), which contains all the information necessary for them to multiply, surrounded by a protective protein coat.

Some sweetpotato viruses are found wherever sweetpotato is grown. Viruses can occur alone or there may be two or more viruses in a plant. Usually, the more viruses in a plant, the lower the yield.

What sweetpotato viruses are in Australia?

Six viruses are currently known to occur in Australia, along with their vectors:

- **Sweetpotato feathery mottle virus (SPFMV)**; spread by aphids (Picture 1); non persistent.
- **Sweetpotato virus 2 (SPV2)**; spread by aphids (Picture 1); non persistent.
- **Sweetpotato virus C (SPVC)**; spread by aphids (Picture 1); non persistent.
- **Sweetpotato chlorotic fleck virus (SPCFV)**; vector is unknown.
- **Sweetpotato collusive virus (SPCV)**; vector is unknown.
- **Sweetpotato leaf curl virus (SPLCV)**; spread by whiteflies (Picture 2); persistent.

Although not strictly a virus, similar principles apply to a type of bacterium called:

- **Phytoplasma or Sweetpotato little leaf (SPLL)**; spread by jassids (leafhoppers) (Picture 3); persistent.



Picture 1. Aphids
(1.5 to 2.5 mm long)



Picture 2. Whitefly
(0.8 to 1.2 mm long)



Picture 3. Leafhoppers
(5 mm long)



How are sweetpotato viruses spread?

Most plant viruses are transmitted from plant to plant by sap-sucking insects. These are called vectors or carriers. The most important sweetpotato virus vectors are aphids, whiteflies and jassids. Apart from cropped sweetpotatoes, other plants are important in the life cycle of many viruses and their vectors, as both viruses and vectors are able to survive adverse conditions and intervals between crop cycles in weed hosts (especially weeds of the Convolvulaceae such as Morning glory), volunteer crop plants, abandoned crops, and vegetative plant parts. **Infected plants cannot be cured.**

Insects can transmit viruses in two ways:

Non-persistent transmission

Virus particles become attached to the mouthparts of the insect as it feeds on virus-infected plants. The insect then transfers the virus particles onto the next plant it feeds upon. This method is very quick, and insects only need to feed for a short time (a few minutes) to transmit the virus between plants.

Persistent transmission

Virus particles are taken in via mouthparts of the insect into the gut (and stored in the salivary glands) as the insect feeds on virus-infected plants. The insect then transfers the virus particles stored in its salivary glands into the next plant it feeds on. This method is slow as insects need to feed for some hours to obtain the virus. The insect is then infected with the virus for the rest of its life.

What are symptoms of sweetpotato virus infection?

Visible virus symptoms vary with different cultivars and environmental effects. Symptoms are not always visible on sweetpotato plants. Symptoms are usually easier to see when plants are stressed due to other deficiencies or excesses e.g. environmental stresses, nutritional disorders, pest attack.

Symptoms include:

- Vein clearing or yellowing of the main veins (Pictures 4 and 5).



Picture 4. Vein clearing, symptoms of SPFMV



Picture 5. Vein clearing along midrib

- Bent, twisted, long and skinny roots (Picture 6) are sometimes caused by virus infection reducing the number of usable roots. Note that this can also be caused by a range of other factors e.g. high soil nitrogen levels, prolonged waterlogging.
- Russet cracking (Picture 7) and internal cork caused by SPFMV can also reduce storage root quality.
- Mottling (Picture 8) caused by SPFMV.
- Less latex is produced in vines and roots.
- Root system is stunted.
- Less storage roots are produced, smaller storage roots are produced.



Picture 6. Long, twisted roots symptom



Picture 7. Russet cracks from SPFMV



Picture 8. Mottled areas

Symptoms (cont.):

- Chlorotic spots (Picture 9) chlorotic areas with purple edges (Picture 10).
- Chlorotic spots with bubbling or puckering of leaves (Picture 11).



Picture 9. Chlorotic (yellow) spots



Picture 10. Purple edged chlorotic spots



Picture 11. Chlorotic (yellow) spot symptom

- Leaf curl (Picture 12) caused by Begomovirus.
- Little leaves, often round with curled up edges, caused by phytoplasma and/or SPLCV (Picture 12).
- Stunting of the whole plant or the plant grows many stems giving it a bushy appearance, characteristic of SPL (Picture 13).



Picture 12. SPLCV, leaf curling symptoms



Picture 13. SPLL symptoms stunted plants with small leaves and bushy stems



How to reduce losses from virus and phytoplasma diseases

Start with clean planting material

The most important strategy for growing healthy sweetpotatoes is to source pathogen-tested planting material from a reliable supplier.


Sweetpotato feathery mottle viruses and Begomoviruses are endemic in the main sweetpotato growing areas of Australia. It is inevitable that sweetpotatoes multiplied on growers' properties over several seasons in these areas will be virus infected, unless they are using insect-proofed structures and vigilant monitoring programs. The only exception may be very isolated properties, screened by large areas of non-host vegetation, with low densities of weeds and stringent farm hygiene protocols.

- Use Pathogen Tested (PT) planting material.

Minimising virus re-infection in plant beds

Assuming you are starting with PT material, the next step is to multiply up your material (probably using bedding roots in seed beds) to minimise the chance and rate of reinfection.

- Locate seed beds as far as practically possible away from commercial sweetpotato plantings, or any other potential sources of virus infection. However this should be balanced by the need to meticulously observe and manage the seed beds, so they should be easily accessible to the responsible manager on a regular (e.g. daily) basis.
- Ideally, use windbreak plantings to further isolate seed beds. Windbreaks can reduce the spread of virus vectors into the seed bed area, as well as promote superior irrigation distribution.
- Regularly inspect seed beds for any signs of virus or phytoplasma infection. Remove any suspicious plants immediately.
- Maintain a regular program for keeping vectors out of the planting beds. Non-organic growers can rotate a sequence of systemic and contact pesticides according to registered uses.
- Vectors of non-persistent viruses will eventually be killed after feeding on plants sprayed with systemic insecticide. However, because these viruses can be transmitted within seconds, many plants become infected before the insect dies or moves out of the crop. Do not simply rely on systemic insecticides to manage virus vectors.

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- Insecticides are more effective against persistently transmitted viruses because insects are killed before they have time to acquire and transmit the virus.
 - Severe virus re-infection is the primary reason why seed beds become ineffective as sources of planting material. The longer you can keep virus levels in your seed beds low, the more options you have for extending the life of those beds.

Practice vigorous farm hygiene

- Maintaining good farm hygiene is the simplest and most important tool you can use to help manage pest populations. Good farm hygiene will reduce the number of pests developing on and being spread around your farm. Using a combination of management options can be successful in keeping virus infection to a minimum.
- Meticulously manage weeds of the Convolvulaceae family, which includes morning glory, bell vine, red and pink convulvulus, mile-a-minute or coastal morning glory and bindweed. These are related to sweetpotato, and potentially carry many of the diseases that infect your crop.
- Also manage weeds that may sustain pests including aphids, silverleaf whitefly and jassids.
- Clean vehicles and equipment when moving between farms. Also be conscious of people as carriers of potential contaminants, such as soil on boots, or insects in clothing.
- Hygiene principles apply not just to your cropped land, but extend to your headlands, borders, native strips, roads and laneways, drainage areas. Importantly, maintain good hygiene around your packing and machinery sheds as well, being particularly vigilant about sweetpotato materials, either roots or plants including reject root dump sites.

Monitor and manage commercial crops

- Sequential plantings close together will make it easier for pests such as aphids and silverleaf whitefly to move into new crops.
- Where practical, plant new crops up-wind of old crops, to reduce the risk of pests and diseases being blown from old to younger crops.
- Remove all stunted plants, e.g. SPLP infected plants, when/if they appear in the field.
- Crops are likely to be infested with pests in dry weather, e.g. in spring, when surrounding weeds and other vegetation dry off, particularly when your crop is the only green vegetation around. Be particularly vigilant and ready to act in these circumstances.



Managing fields post-harvest

- Once a crop has been harvested, get rid of the remaining materials as quickly as possible. One option is to use a rotary hoe to chop up leftover sweetpotatoes into smaller pieces to increase the rate of decomposition. Another option is to use a combination of a pesticide to kill the pest, and a herbicide to kill the regrowth crop to manage sweetpotato insect pests like silverleaf whitefly. Not spraying and leaving the regrowth crop in the ground results in a breeding ground for insect vectors and other pests which can then spread into new crops.
- Remove all sweetpotato residues from previous crops, e.g. leftover storage roots and residue that could harbour pests. Volunteer plants will attract and maintain or increase populations of viruses. Apart from in the field, volunteer plants can also arise in areas where reject sweetpotatoes are stored or dumped. Manage **all** sweetpotato materials on your farm.

Biosecurity awareness

Currently there are numerous sweetpotato viruses present in other parts of the world that have not been found in Australia. Growers should be alert to the potential introduction of these viruses, and report any unusual plant symptoms through the appropriate biosecurity channels for their state. Growers can also contact Sandra Dennien (DAF) at Gatton Research Facility.

Of particular concern is Sweetpotato chlorotic stunt virus (SPCSV). In combination with the Potyvirus SPFMV, SPCSV can cause sweetpotato virus disease (SPV) as the viruses interact (synergistic reactions) SPCSV has also been found in other disease complexes as well. It is suspected of being in Papua New Guinea; SPV causes 50-70% yield reductions in affected crops. A fact sheet on this virus is available on the ASPG website.