

## Fungal infection takes the juice out of Nagpur oranges

Nagpur oranges, which battled water scarcity in summer, are now succumbing to a fungal infection brought on by excess rain.

In just a few months, Vidarbha region has witnessed a weather paradox, with drought-like water scarcity in summer and excess rains in September combined with continuous cloudy sky conditions causing the infection.

Experts in agriculture have pegged a 50% dip in the production of Nagpur oranges this harvest season. Some farmers are quoting an 80% loss of the produce already being harvested from the orchards.

Ambadas Huchche, principal scientist (horticulture), ICAR-Central Citrus Research Institute (CCRI), Nagpur, told TOI that there has been a 40% to 50% dip in production due to a fungal infection called 'phytophthora palmvora'.

"The rain began late in the third week of July and have continued till now. The atmospheric humidity is around 90% to 95%. Such conditions favour the growth of this fungus," he said.

Huchche said the fungus is invading developing fruits and causing brown rot. "The institute had issued timely advisory to farmers from the fourth week of July for fungi control. Some farmers have benefitted," he said.

Orange grower Rushikesh Sontakke from Anjangaon Surji in Amravati said, "Locations like Warud, Morshi, Chandur Bazar, Achalpur are facing this problem. The entire Nagpur orange belt may be left with just 20% of the produce due to extreme weather conditions. From March to June, we faced severe water shortage with wells drying up. Now, there has been so much rain that it has begun affecting the



produce. We have experienced 80% fruit dropping and full-grown oranges are getting affected by the fungus.”

He said supplies of Nagpur oranges have already begun in the markets and will continue till January.

“If I produced 7 tonne oranges last year in the same period, I would produce just 1.4 tonne this time. That is the severity of the drop in supplies,” he said.

Rahul Wath, a farmer with 50 acres of orange orchards in Amravati, said, “The fungus directly affects the roots of the trees, causing the fruit to rot. This has resulted in a fall of around 8 tonne from our farm, which is almost a 50% drop.”

Amol Totey, working president of the Orange Growers’ Association of India, said continuous humid weather, rain and cloudy skies for a long period boosts fungal growth. “Incidence of juice sucking moth has also gone up. This moth punctures the fruit, rendering the produce unmarketable. In comparison to last year, only 50% produce is available,” he said.

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