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DISAPPOINTMENT AS FOOT AND MOUTH RESTRICTIONS LEAD TO CANCELLATION OF POTATO EVENT

The date for the Farming Connect Llanrhystud Potato Trials Open Day proved to be one of the warmest and sunniest in this soaking summer. Sadly, nobody came. The event was postponed because of Foot and Mouth in distant Surrey.

A pity because what remained after a month of potato blight – one of the most severe epidemics since 1845 - was visually dramatic.

The trial comprised three blocks: 5 early and salad varieties planted between the 5th and 7th of April; 20 plots of 7 Sarpo varieties and 3 standard varieties in two replicates planted on the 29th April; and 5 varieties of maincrop heritage varieties planted between April 29th and 30th. The whole trial was conducted to organic standards, on land certified organic since 1984.

As well as evaluating their ability to resist foliar blight infestation, the trial evaluated the suitability of varieties for growing in areas marginal for potato production, like most of Ceredigion.

Although nearly half of the earlies were successfully harvested before blight struck in early July, in the warm, wet conditions known as Smith Periods, the epidemic spread quickly. By July 28th, all of the standard varieties – including those promoted as blight resistant - were substantially infected. Some of the Hungarian Sarpo varieties bred for blight resistance were also succumbing. By the first week of August nearly all varieties had between 90% to 100% foliar blight. But there were four exceptions. Sarpo Eric, an unlisted variety had just under 50% of its haulm infected with foliar blight. Sarpo Will, also unlisted, had only 3% infection. Unlisted Sarpo Val had 0.65% infection and the listed, commercially available Sarpo Mira, 0.5% infection.

Assessments for yield, tuber blight, eating quality and market acceptability will continue.

The Open Day was supported by Organic Centre Wales and the Centre for Alternative Land Use who have agreed to a re-scheduled event to be held in Aberystwyth. Full details of the trial will be presented along with slides, discussions and taste testing. To reserve a place, or to receive information, contact Sian Lloyd at ADAS Pwllpeiran on 01974 282229.

David Frost

Photos available on request.