

Surprised by Disease..... Some Reflections by David Walshaw

Olives NZ members met at Kapiti Olives' grove for a field day event after the AGM on 15th October 2011.

Prior to the members arriving, Juan Vilar and Javier Hidalgo, our visitors from Spain, and Andrew Taylor (President) and I had a walk around to familiarise themselves with the grove and its current state. As you might imagine this is rather un-nerving as an ex-townie turned grower my learning curve has been steep.

Before I tell you what we found perhaps it would be helpful if I described my grove management "style and aims". Planting was done in December 2004 and I have 2070 trees with plantings of Frantoio, Picual, Koroneiki, and Leccino with pollinating Pendolino. Between rows I have a mowing strip of orchard grass and mostly weed free dirt under the trees. There are 6 metres between rows and 5 metres between trees. Pruning has been continual with wine glass shape being the norm. Soil tests have been done every couple of years and fertilizer applied where necessary to correct deficiencies. Leaf analysis has just been done for the first time.

My philosophy has been to have the grove as sustainable as can sensibly be done. Organic growing was considered but I felt it was extreme and enormously hard work. Striving to be sustainable I have not, until now, used any chemicals except Glyphosate for weed control a few times a year.

And now to the main issue. My approach until recently, 7 years in, seems to have worked with visiting consultants and others commenting that the trees and grove seemed to be in fine order. There was some evidence of Peacock Pot and some leaf fall but did not seem to be much and certainly not of epidemic proportion.

BUT just recently, over the last 12 months the prevalence of Peacock Spot and leaf fall seemed to be spreading and I did not really know why and what had changed. I still don't really.

So in come my visitors who looked closely at the leaves of some trees and they discover Cercospora and quite an amount of Peacock Spot. I did not even know about Cercospora. How do you recognise it? Turn the leaf over and look for a grey/sooty line along the middle of the leaf. It really is quite obvious when you know to look there!

Oh dear! So what do we do about this? Spray, I am told as though this is normal. I can tell you that this was not good news when you have avoided it in favour of an almost entirely natural method of grove management.

I have been tree spraying a liquid seaweed based fertilizer with good results I think, growth-wise but not disease-control wise. I find I can mix this with a product called Dodine so I have sprayed this product mix twice, 15 days apart. I am advised that Dodine is a cure and also a protectant. The maximum sprays recommended would be 3 times.

The good news is that these applications seemed to have worked very well as any incidence of disease is minimal again. The next trick is to keep it that way. In addition I was advised to spray Manzate regularly, particularly when it is likely to be moist and humid. We haven't really had prolonged periods like that so I have not yet sprayed this product. I am still into avoidance it seems! However I will do so during autumn and up to 28 days before harvest.

So far so good but the lesson for me is to be very vigilant because these diseases can get away on us really quickly.