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2007

# APHIS' Plant Inspection Stations: Protecting American Agriculture From Foreign Pests and Diseases

United States Department fo Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

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Recommended Citation

United States Department fo Agriculture and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, "APHIS' Plant Inspection Stations: Protecting American Agriculture From Foreign Pests and Diseases" (2007). *All U.S. Government Documents (Utah Regional Depository).* Paper 473.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/govdocs/473

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**United States Department of Agriculture**

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Program Aid No. 1942

# APHIS' Plant Inspection Stations

## Protecting American Agriculture From Foreign Pests and Diseases

*Cover photos:* More than 1 billion plants are imported into the United States each year. At the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) plant inspection stations at U.S. ports-of-entry, these plants are inspected to ensure that they are free of pests and diseases. *(These images and all others in the brochure except the historical picture of cherry trees and the shot of a seedling in a human hand were taken by APHIS photographer R. Anson Eaglin).*

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In today's global marketplace, the volume of international trade brings increased potential for the introduction of foreign pests, diseases, and noxious weeds that could threaten the safety of American agriculture. The results of such introductions can have a devastating effect on the U.S. food supply, damage our natural resources, and cost hundreds of millions of dollars in eradication and control measures that ultimately result in higher priced agricultural products for the consumer.

If a pest or disease is imported with a plant or seed intended for planting, it is much more likely to survive and become established because it is arriving on its own food source.

Each year, Plant Health Safeguarding Specialists with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) inspect a large volume of plants that are mailed, carried, and shipped into this country by brokers, travelers, and nursery owners. In fiscal year (FY) 2006 alone, more than 1.3 billion plants were imported into the United States. Such imports go through a series of overlapping safeguarding measures before entry into the country to prevent the introduction of exotic pests and diseases (e.g., the Asian longhorned beetle and a damaging strain of potato brown rot that could be imported on geraniums) that threaten U.S. agriculture and natural resources.

PPQ export certification specialists at Miami's plant inspection station complete a phytosanitary certificate for the export of agricultural goods from the United States.

Once the commodities arrive in the United States, specialists with APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program perform their own inspections of these plants, cuttings, and seeds and review all associated permits and documentation to ensure that the shipments comply with import regulations and that any pest or disease risks are sufficiently mitigated. To assist in this effort, PPQ has established 17 plant inspection stations located at ports-of-entry throughout the country at major international airports and seaports and at major crossings along the U.S.–Mexican border.

At these plant inspection stations, PPQ also enforces the rules and regulations that apply to the import and export of plant species protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The plant inspection stations' dedicated team of botanists, entomologists, plant pathologists, plant health safeguarding specialists, and support personnel execute this complex mission through various means, such as:

- Inspecting propagative plant material for importation into the United States;
- Using technologically advanced tools and techniques to deliver an accurate identification of plants, seeds, and plant pests in a timely manner;
- Applying chemical and nonchemical treatments to disinfest and disinfect plant material against pests and disease organisms;
- Issuing Federal phytosanitary (plant health) certificates for plants, seeds, and plant products being exported from the United States to ensure that they are free of pests and diseases; and
- Regulating plants and plant products in support of the ESA and CITES.

The plantings of cherry trees around the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, symbolize the natural beauty of our Nation's capital. But the trees in the original shipment received in January 1910—a gift from the Japanese Government—had to be destroyed by USDA after they were found to be infested with insects, nematodes, and diseases not known to exist in the United States. More vigorous phytosanitary practices ensured that subsequent importations of cherry trees entered without such risks. *(USDA photo by Bob Nichols.)*

## The Evolution of the Plant Inspection Stations

In January 1910, as a gift from the Japanese Government, the United States received a shipment of 2,000 flowering cherry trees. Unfortunately, USDA detected a number of exotic insects, diseases, and nematodes on these small trees, and the shipment had to be destroyed. Since then, a number of laws were passed to better protect American agriculture, including the Plant Quarantine Act of 1912, the Plant Pest Act in 1957, the Federal Noxious Weed Act in 1974, and finally the Plant Protection Act (PPA) in 2000. The PPA consolidates all or part of 10 existing plant health laws into one comprehensive law, including the authority to regulate plants, plant products, certain biological control organisms, noxious weeds, and plant pests.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, inspired Congress to pass the Agriculture Bioterrorism Protection Act of 2002. That same year, new legislation created the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to unify Federal inspection forces and protect our Nation from a host of terrorist threats. More than 22 Federal agencies consolidated into the new department, including much of APHIS' PPQ workforce. However, Congress recognized that the inspection of imported plants and seeds was a unique and important task most appropriately handled by agricultural professionals. Therefore, lawmakers decided to keep the inspection responsibilities for imported plants and seeds, a high-risk pathway for pest introduction, with USDA, APHIS, PPQ.

To get a better perspective on the magnitude of the work being done at the 17 plant inspection stations nationwide, consider these FY 2006 statistics:

APHIS inspected

- More than 1.3 billion nonendangered plants and plant parts (excluding seeds)
- More than 33 million endangered plants and plant parts (excluding seeds)
- More than 1.4 million kg of seeds

APHIS intercepted

- More than 3,300 quarantine-significant pests or diseases

APHIS treated

- More than 17 million plants or plant parts (excluding seeds)
- More than 15,000 kg of seeds

APHIS' plant inspection stations have evolved from their developmental stage in the first half of the 20th century into one of the agency's most visible assets in safeguarding American agriculture in the new millennium.

Some APHIS plant inspection stations have big incinerators to destroy infested plant material onsite. These incinerators operate through the use of natural gases and have two chambers—one to burn the infested material and one to burn the ashes that are emitted by the first chamber. This setup ensures that no pollutants are released into the environment.

## Plant Germplasm Inspection Station

PPQ also operates a specialized facility, known as the Plant Germplasm Inspection Station, in Beltsville, MD, as part of the National Plant Germplasm Quarantine Center. The facility is uniquely designed for handling imported plant germplasm and other valuable plant materials for plant breeding and research programs that, under most circumstances, would not be permitted into the United States. These items must enter the United States under what is known as a "Departmental Permit" and are sent to the inspection station in Beltsville, where they are examined and, if necessary, treated before being allowed to move forward to the receiving facility approved on the Departmental Permit.

## Importing Plants, Plant Products, and Seeds

Under authority of the PPA, PPQ requires permits for the importation and transit of plants and plant products. The rules found in the Code of Federal Regulations at Title 7, part 319 prohibit or restrict the importation of certain plants and plant products to prevent introducing exotic plant pests into the country.

All imported articles intended for propagation, including seeds, must also be accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate of inspection by the exporting country. Phytosanitary certificates verify that the shipment has been inspected by the exporting country's national plant protection service and found to be free of plant pests or diseases prior to export. The certificates also identify the plants by their scientific names and confirm that the shipment meets U.S. regulations for importation.

U.S. importers should secure agricultural permits for shipments far in advance of their transport. Import permits may be obtained from:

USDA–APHIS–PPQ
Permit Unit
4700 River Road, Unit 133
Riverdale, MD 20737
Toll free: (877) 770–5990

Plant health safeguarding specialists typically examine samples taken from each variety of seed being imported into the United States. Here, the seeds are undergoing a more indepth inspection process.

You can also apply for and receive permits online through a system known as ePermits. ePermits is a Web-based tool that allows you to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it on the Internet. The new system, which is being released in multiple phases, also enables Federal regulatory officials to issue, track, and rapidly verify the validity of import permits. The system minimizes the time it takes to complete permit applications, process the data internally, and issue the permits. To find out which permits are available online, please visit <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/permits>.

When a shipment arrives at a PPQ plant inspection station, plant health safeguarding specialists collect phytosanitary certificates from the importers. Typically, inspectors examine samples taken from each variety of plant and seed that is being imported. The inspection process includes a thorough examination of the leaves, stems, roots, and seeds of the plant. With the exception of only a few specified types, plants must not be rooted in growing media, such as soil, because insects, diseases, and noxious weeds could be hidden in there. Regulations also limit plant size and age to ensure that the plants are a manageable size for the inspection process.

## Ways To Import Plants, Plant Products, and Seeds

Plants, plant products, and seeds may be imported into the United States either by mail, freight, or passenger baggage.

### Mail Shipments

Importers may mail plants and plant products directly to a plant inspection station. PPQ strongly recommends the following procedures for mailing plants:

1. Pack the plants in sturdy boxes or crates.
2. Indicate what is inside the package, as well as its origin, by clearly marking the outside of the package.
3. Use APHIS' green and yellow mailing label, issued with the PPQ permit, to ensure proper handling of the package.
4. Include your name, address, telephone number, and permit number with the package so that inspectors can forward the package to you after inspection.
5. Enclose the original phytosanitary certificate issued by the national plant protection service of the exporting country.

### Passenger Baggage

Importers may bring in up to 12 soil-free plants or plant material and seeds of herbaceous plants that are not subject to prohibition or special requirements such as a permit, post-entry quarantine, treatment, or ESA or CITES documentation. To import more than 12 plants, you must have a written permit and the plants must enter the United States at a port with a USDA plant inspection station, where clearance will take place. All quantities of plants or seeds must be accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate from the exporting country unless the importer has been granted a USDA import permit exempting such documentation.

For importations other than the above, the importer should hire a customs broker to arrange for the delivery of freight, cargo, or unaccompanied baggage shipments.

For more information, please visit http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/permits/nursery.shtml or call toll-free at (877) 770–5990.

## Discovering a Plant Pest, Disease, or Weed

When plant health safeguarding specialists discover a pest, disease, or noxious weed in or on an imported plant or seed, they ensure that an accurate identification is made as soon as possible. The specialists refer all such interceptions to the appropriate technical specialists, known as identifiers, who examine the samples and determine the extent of harm they could cause. Should an identifier determine that the organism is not harmful and poses no economic threat to U.S. agriculture, the plants are released to the importer. If an identifier determines that an organism is a known plant pest and does not exist in the United States or exists here in limited distribution, the plants must undergo a quarantine treatment, be reexported, or be destroyed. If the plants require fumigation treatment, the PPQ specialist releases them for entry into the United States only after the treatment is completed.

The Asian longhorned beetle has been detected on imported Bonsai trees in the past. As a result PPQ made its import requirements for bonsai plants more stringent.

A plant pathologist at the John F. Kennedy Airport's plant inspection station completes a procedure for detecting parasitic nematodes from imported plant materials. Nematodes are microscopic organisms that feed on the roots of various plants, causing considerable yield loss.

## APHIS' Commitment to CITES Enforcement

Sixteen of the 17 PPQ plant inspection stations have been approved to inspect plants that are protected by CITES, such as exotic orchids or cacti. An international agreement, CITES is a comprehensive treaty signed by more than 170 countries, including the United States. It regulates the commercial trade of endangered species and monitors the trade of species that are at risk of becoming endangered. Since the treaty's ratification in 1974, CITES representatives have worked tirelessly to protect the world's plant and animal resources.

Enforcement of CITES rules protecting plants and plant parts offered for importation is the shared responsibility of both USDA–APHIS–PPQ and DHS's Customs and Border Protection (CBP). APHIS is responsible for enforcing plant quarantine laws and the CITES permit requirements during plant inspections while CBP handles the inspection of nonliving CITES imports such as lumber and medicinal products.

More than 33 million of the 1.3 billion plants that were inspected for quarantine purposes in FY 2006 were regulated because of their status as endangered species. APHIS also facilitated the export of 3 million CITES-listed plants and more than 2 million kg of CITES-related products, such as dried American ginseng roots. If plants protected by CITES arrive at a PPQ plant inspection station without the appropriate CITES permit or certificate, inspectors seize them immediately and offer them back to their country of origin at that country's expense or place the plants in one of the many designated plant rescue centers in this country. There they are grown for research, breeding, or educational purposes.

To learn more about CITES, please visit the APHIS CITES Web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/permits/index.shtml>.

Most orchids, like the one shown here, are classified as threatened and are protected by CITES. Importers must have proper documentation before bringing CITES-protected plants into the United States.

## You Can Help Protect American Agriculture

Whether mailing a boxwood from England, carrying propagated orchids back from Thailand, or shipping a load of philodendrons from Central America, you must follow USDA's proper procedures for importing plants and plant products. By following these procedures, you will help protect American agriculture from foreign plant pests and diseases.

The plant inspection stations play a vital role in ensuring the health and value of the nation's agriculture and its natural resources. *(Agricultural Research Service photo by Scott Bauer.)*

## For More Information

Here is a list of PPQ plant inspection stations current as of June 2007. But note that contact information is subject to change. Please contact PPQ's Plant Safeguarding and Pest Identification unit at (301) 734–5312 or visit the APHIS Web site at http://www/aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/plant_inspection_stations.shtml for the most up-to-date information.

**Arizona**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
9 North Grand Avenue, Room 2214
Nogales, AZ 85621
Phone: (520) 287–4783
Fax: (520) 287–6941

**California**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
11840 S. La Cienega Blvd.
Hawthorne, CA 90250
Phone: (310) 725–1910
Fax: (310) 725–1913

USDA, APHIS, PPQ
389 Oyster Point Blvd., Suite 2
South San Francisco, CA 94080
Phone: (650) 876–9093
Fax: (650) 876–9008

USDA, APHIS, PPQ
9777 Via de la Amistad, Room 140
San Diego, CA 92154
Phone: (619) 661–3316
Fax: (619) 661–3047

**Florida**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
3500 NW 62d Ave.
Miami, FL 33122
Phone: (305) 526–2825
Fax: (305) 871–4205

USDA, APHIS, PPQ
9317 Tradeport Drive
Orlando, FL 32827
Phone: (407) 648–6856
Fax: (407) 648–6859

**Georgia**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
Hartsfield Perishables Complex
1270 Woolman Place
Atlanta, GA 30354
Phone: (404) 564–2176
Fax: (404) 564–2312/2305/2315

**Guam**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
P.O Box 8769
Tamuning, GU 96931–6030
Phone: (671) 647–6030
Fax: (671) 647–6029

**Hawaii**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
Honolulu International Airport
300 Rodgers Blvd., #57
Honolulu, HI 96819–1897
Phone: (808) 861–8494
Fax: (808) 861–8500

**Louisiana**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
900 East Airline Service Road A
Kenner, LA 70063
Phone: (504) 464–0430
Fax: (504) 465–0968

**Maryland**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
APHIS National Plant Germplasm
Inspection Station
BARC–East, Bldg. 580
Beltsville, MD 20705
Phone: (301) 504–8141
Fax: (301) 504–8539

**New Jersey**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
Frances Krim Memorial
Inspection Station
2500 Brunswick Avenue, Building G
Linden, NJ 07036
Phone: (908) 862–2012
Fax: (908) 862–2095

**New York**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
230-59 International Airport Centers
Boulevard
Building C—Suite 100, Room 109
Jamaica, NY 11413
Phone: (718) 553–1732
Fax: (718) 553–0060

**Puerto Rico**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
150 Central Sector
Building C–2, Warehouse 3
Carolina, PR 00979
Phone: (787) 253–7850
Fax: (787) 253–4514

**Texas**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
P.O. Drawer Box 393
100 Los Indios Blvd.
Los Indios, TX 78567
Phone: (956) 399–2085
Fax: (956) 399–4001

USDA, APHIS, PPQ
19581 Lee Road
Humble, TX 77338
Phone: (281) 443–2063
Fax: (281) 443–7643

**Washington**
USDA, APHIS, PPQ
16215 Air Cargo Road, Suite 112
Seattle, WA 98158–1301
Phone: (206) 764–6547
Fax: (206) 764–3825