

# Seed Decay And Seedling Blights Of Corn

DR. LAURA SWEETS

COLUMBIA, MO.

Some years, early season stand establishment problems are widespread and, in some cases, severe especially in early planted corn fields. The weather pattern during and immediately after planting is a major factor contributing to those problems. Corn which begins to germinate before periods of cold, wet weather in April or early May tends to show damage from saturated soils, cold soil temperatures, frost injury, herbicide injury, nitrogen deficiencies, seed decay and seedling blights. In some fields the seed decay and seedling blight may progress into crown decay resulting in even more severe stunting and yellowing of plants. If weather patterns are favorable for germination and emergence of corn and not as favorable for development of corn seed and seedling diseases, there will be a substantial reduction in seed decay and seedling blight problems in corn.

Corn planting has been moving along with weather delays in some areas of the state. The unusual fluctuations in weather conditions (near record highs one weekend followed by lows the next weekend) make it difficult to predict how severe corn seed decay and seedling blights will be this year.

Seed decay and seedling blights of corn are generally caused by soil-inhabiting fungi species such as *Pythium*, *Fusarium*, *Diplodia*, *Rhizoctonia* and *Penicillium*. These fungi may rot the seed prior to germination or cause preemergence or postemergence seedling blight. Affected seeds are usually discolored and soft and may be overgrown with fungi. Rotted seed may be difficult to find because they decompose very rapidly and because soil adheres fairly tightly to the decomposing seed.

With preemergence seedling blights, the seed germinates but the seedlings are killed before they emerge from the soil. The coleoptile and primary roots are usually discolored and have a wet, rotted appearance. With postemergence seedling blights, the seedlings emerge through the soil surface before developing symptoms. Seedlings tend to yellow, wilt and die. Discol-

ored, sunken lesions are usually evident on the mesocotyl. Eventually the mesocotyl becomes soft and water soaked. The root system is usually poorly developed, and roots are discolored, water soaked and slough off. If the primary root system and mesocotyl are severely affected before the nodal or permanent root system has developed, the plants have little chance of surviving.

The *Pythium*, *Fusarium*, *Diplodia*, *Rhizoctonia* and *Penicillium* species which cause seed decay, seedling blight and crown decay are common in soils throughout the state. If conditions are favorable for germination and emergence, these fungi may not have the opportunity to invade seed, germinating seed or young seedlings so seed decay, seedling blights and crown rot will not be significant problems. On the other hand, conditions that are not favorable for germination and emergence, give these soil fungi more time to attack the seed and developing plants.

Numerous other factors also contribute to early season corn establishment problems. Insect damage, nutrient imbalances, herbicide injury, soil conditions and environmental factors, especially saturated soil conditions and oxygen deprivation, may also cause or contribute to early season corn establishment problems. Corn seedling blights are more severe in wet soils, in low lying areas in a field or in soils that have been compacted or remain wet for an extended period of time. Low soil temperatures (50-55°F) and wet soil conditions especially favor *Pythium* seed decay and seedling blight. Disease severity is also affected by planting depth, soil type, seed quality, mechanical injury to seed, soil crusting, herbicide injury or other factors which delay germination and emergence of corn.

Planting high quality seed into a good seedbed when soil temperatures are above 50°F will help minimize these early season problems. Virtually all field corn seed comes with a fungicide seed treatment. Hopper box treatments can be used to supplement the existing seed treatment. Δ

DR. LAURA E. SWEETS: Extension Assistant Professor, Commercial Agriculture and Plant Pathology, University of Missouri