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Crop Update

August 21, 2026

Salinas Valley: Why Late-Season Yields Decline

As the Salinas Valley growing season moves toward fall, one of the biggest challenges growers face is not necessarily a lack of planted acreage, but a reduction in **harvestable yield.**

Months of production, periods of summer heat, moisture, insect activity and repeated crop cycles can increase disease and virus pressure in late-season fields. Three issues we are watching closely in lettuce and romaine are **Sclerotinia, Pythium wilt and Impatiens Necrotic Spot Virus (INSV).**

These problems develop differently, but the end result can be similar: plants that looked like available supply earlier in the growing cycle may never make it into a finished carton.

When Problems Overlap

Perhaps the most difficult late-season challenge is that these **issues do not always occur independently.**

A lettuce plant can show symptoms of INSV while also suffering from Pythium or Sclerotinia. For example, a plant with INSV may show the characteristic necrotic spotting and stunting, while Pythium simultaneously damages its root system and causes the outer leaves to wilt.

Add periods of heat, mildew and insect pressure, and the amount of usable product harvested from a field can fall substantially even though the original acreage has not changed.

That distinction becomes increasingly important as we move toward the end of the Salinas season.

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What This Means for Supply

Current Salinas Valley supplies remain adequate across many lettuce and leafy green items, but disease pressure is becoming more apparent as the season progresses.

The important number is increasingly **not how many acres are planted, but how much of each acre remains harvestable.**

As school and foodservice demand continues to improve, declining field yields can quickly change the supply-and-demand balance. These diseases and viruses are one reason markets that remain relatively inexpensive today can begin moving higher with only a modest increase in demand.

We will continue monitoring Salinas Valley field conditions as growers work through late-summer acreage and move toward the fall transition.

The issues lettuce and romaine are facing explained:

Sclerotinia: Lettuce Drop

Sclerotinia, commonly called **lettuce drop,** is a soilborne fungal disease and an important cause of plant loss in coastal California lettuce.

The disease is favored by moist soil conditions. In the Salinas Valley, Sclerotinia minor is particularly important and attacks plant tissue near the soil surface.

What it looks like:

- Older and outer leaves begin to wilt and yellow
- Leaves eventually collapse onto the soil
- The crown develops a soft, watery decay
- White fungal growth and small black survival structures called sclerotia may form around the affected crown
- Advanced plants can completely collapse and become unharvestable

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One of the challenges with Sclerotinia is its ability to remain in the soil between crops. The sclerotia can survive for multiple years, allowing disease pressure to build in fields with a history of infection.

Growers manage the disease through careful irrigation and drainage, crop rotation where practical, removal of infected plants, field preparation and targeted crop-protection programs.

Pythium Wilt: The Problem Below Ground

Pythium wilt is caused by the water mold Pythium uncinulatum and attacks the root system of lettuce.

Unlike Sclerotinia, which primarily destroys the crown, Pythium damages the feeder roots and taproot. The pathogen produces spores capable of moving through water films in the soil, making saturated or poorly drained portions of fields particularly vulnerable.

What it looks like:

- Stunted or uneven plants
- Yellowing and wilting of older outer leaves
- Outer leaves collapsing flat onto the ground while younger leaves may initially remain upright
- Brown to black discoloration and decay of feeder roots
- Darkened or rotted taproots
- Severe infections eventually cause the entire plant to collapse

Pythium has historically become more noticeable later in the Salinas season, and heat can further stress plants with already compromised root systems.

Management centers heavily on **water management and drainage**, along with variety selection and other disease-management tools available to growers.

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INSV: A Virus Carried by Thrips

INSV is different from Sclerotinia and Pythium because it is **not a soilborne disease.** Impatiens Necrotic Spot Virus is transmitted by the **western flower thrips**, a tiny insect common throughout the Salinas Valley. Thrips can acquire the virus while feeding on infected weeds or plants and later transmit it as they move into lettuce fields.

Warm conditions favor thrips activity, while weeds and other host plants surrounding production areas can provide reservoirs for both the insect and the virus.

INSV symptoms can include:

- Brown or necrotic spots, often beginning on inner leaves
- Yellowing and discoloration
- Twisted or distorted growth
- Significant plant stunting
- Rib and leaf lesions
- Plants that never develop into a marketable head

Romaine has historically been particularly vulnerable to INSV. Once a plant becomes infected, there is no treatment that eliminates the virus from that plant.

Growers fight the problem by controlling host weeds, monitoring and managing thrips populations, removing crop residue and increasingly using romaine varieties with improved genetic resistance to INSV.

Together, these challenges illustrate why late-season supply can tighten quickly, even when planted acreage appears sufficient. As Salinas Valley growers manage rising disease, virus and environmental pressure, harvestable yield—not acreage alone—will remain the key indicator of market availability, quality and pricing through the fall transition.