

Mum patrol



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Michele Garcia cruises through a Seacliff-area garden in search of a renegade mum plant.

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

SEACLIFF — They've been going up and down the streets of a residential neighborhood behind the Sno-White Drive-In since early in the morning. Knocking on doors. Peeking over fences. Traipsing into backyards and braving the "Beware of the dog" signs.

But it's been two hours. And so far the intrepid chrysanthemum white rust inspectors — AKA the mum patrol — haven't found even a trace of their quarry.

They've seen ferns and fuchsias and junipers. Snoozing cats and conversational old people. And they've left lots of "we'll-be-back" notices at houses where no one is home.

But no mums.

"You should have been with us yesterday," Lori MacIntosh-Jose, 42, tells a reporter accompanying them on their rounds Thursday. A chatty veteran of Santa Barbara's medfly battle, she's an avid gardener who says one fringe benefit of her inspection job is getting to see so many gardens. "We must have dug up, was it, 16 or so?"

Her mum-detecting partner Michele Garcia isn't sure of the number either. A lot.

"We dug and dug," says Garcia, a quiet 26-year-old who commutes from Salinas and most recently worked on walnut-husk fly research. "Some were really old plants."

The two are part of a federally-funded effort here that could cost as much as \$100,000 to eradicate the imported fungus disease that threatens the state's \$44 mil-

Plant cops on the beat

Hunt for bad fungus coming to your home

lion chrysanthemum industry.

Normally, chrysanthemums are a most congenial plant for the home gardener. But they're in big trouble because of the white rust that affects their leaves. Ag officials hope to keep the disease from spreading throughout the U.S. by outlawing the plants in much of the county between now and May 31.

The fungus affects only two types of chrysanthemums, and survives only a short time off the plant. Getting rid of one season's worth of chrysanthemums, officials say, should eliminate it once and for all.

Gardeners were supposed to have uprooted all their chrysanthemum plants within the quarantine area by Oct. 1.

Now, MacIntosh-Jose and Garcia are one of a half dozen teams going door-to-

door to find any plants that were overlooked, inadvertently or otherwise.

Sometimes people don't know what the plant looks like, and sometimes they haven't heard about the quarantine. A few people have refused to allow inspectors access to their yards.

"We'll send them a nasty-gram," said local agricultural commissioner Dave Moeller, whose office is cooperating with state and federal agricultural officials. "Refusing to allow the inspection is a violation."

Consequences could include civil penalties, or a fine; conceivably even criminal charges, he said.

Inspectors have checked more than 7,000 gardens since they started last month, said Cliff Ramos, the San Jose-based agricultural official overseeing the program. Inspectors began near the Pajaro River and are working their way northwest. Chrysanthemums have turned up in 350 of those yards, Ramos said, with actual cases of white rust in two.

Before it's over, inspectors expect to knock on 50,000 doors from Watsonville to Santa Cruz, he said.

The quarantine area runs from the Pajaro River at the south end of the county northwest to Santa Cruz's Bay Street. Not affected are Scotts Valley, the San Lorenzo Valley and the North Coast, as well as most of the inland mountain areas.

The fungus doesn't affect mums' close relatives, Shasta daisies and marguerites, or asters, which look similar.

It's getting on for noon when the searching finally pays off.

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"We found one," says MacIntosh-Jose, leading the way to a weedy sideyard.

Behind a loaded lemon tree and an overgrown purple solanum, next to a purple fuchsia half-covered with baby tears is a rather bedraggled chrysanthemum plant.

It carries no flowers to betray it, but the inspectors identify it by its leaves.

"After a while, you kind of tune in to what it looks like," MacIntosh-Jose says.

The plant is in the front yard, but she doesn't pull it out.

"We never take anything without their permission,"

she said, writing out a note that she'll leave in the front door. Later, someone will visit again, or try to get permission over the phone. The mums will be dug up and double-bagged before being taken to the county dump.

The alternative for those who can't bear to be mumless is to pay \$100 for state officials to spray your plants regularly with an approved fungicide during the quarantine. So far, about five people have signed up, Ramos said.

For information, call the white rust hot line, 454-3300, or the county agricultural commissioner's office, 454-2383.