

Mum patrols return to county

By MAY WONG

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SANTA CRUZ — The mum patrol is back.

Starting today, state agriculture inspectors will be checking the gardens of a few thousand homes in the Mid- to South County area. They will be hunting for any traces of the white rust disease that virtually wiped out the county's modest commercial chrysanthemum crop industry in 1993 and forced homeowners countywide to destroy their chrysanthemum plants in the fall of 1995.

Inspectors descended upon the county that year, making sure residents were complying with the mandatory mum eradication which ended in June 1996. The inspectors combed through the gardens of more than 22,000 homes from Watsonville to Santa Cruz and removed plants from about 4 percent of those properties.

This survey, however, will be on a "much smaller scale" from the 1995 effort, according to Dave Moeller, the county's agricultural commissioner. The inspectors want to simply see whether the eradication effort successfully got rid of the nasty mum killer here, Moeller said.

"We'll never do a host-free period again," Moeller said. "It was pretty hard to ask people to destroy their plants for the common good, or for us to take private property and destroy it."

The survey is expected to last about three weeks and will cover the coastal areas where the disease seemed to flourish. Those areas include Capitola, Soquel, La Selva Beach and Watsonville.

As in the past, state inspectors will not traipse into people's back yards without the homeowner's permission first. If no one is home to answer their knock, the inspectors will leave a "We'll be back" note and check only the front yards, Moeller said.

The inspectors are hoping to not find any diseased mums. But if they do, they will have to immediately pull them, Moeller said.

The fungal disease causes light green or yellow spots on the surface of mum leaves and deadly white or pink pustules underneath.

The fungus is not native to this country, and scientists are still not sure how it got here. Some speculate it came in an uninspected ship-

ment of chrysanthemum cuttings or flowers from abroad.

The disease was first discovered in California in 1990 in three counties: Santa Barbara, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz. Then in 1993, the plant killer hit hard, inflicting more than \$3 million in losses to the three counties' mum growers.

A statewide effort was launched to protect California's threatened \$44 million chrysanthemum industry, leading to the 1995 eradication effort in Santa Cruz County. Retailers here were also banned from selling the fall flowers during that period.

Also, quarantines were imposed, restricting the import and export of chrysanthemums in certain counties. That quarantine is still in effect in Santa Cruz County today, mandating that the few remaining commercial chrysanthemum growers in the county follow a strict set of rules, including a costly fungicide treatment.

If you think you may have chrysanthemums infected with white rust, please call the county Agricultural Commissioner's Office at 454-2620 or 763-8080.