Blackleg in Canola – Reason to Panic?

The simple answer: no. However, there is reason to be aware of and knowledgeable about blackleg. The top three lines of defense:

1. Crop rotation – be sure that canola, other Brassica crops and cover crops containing Brassica species are only grown in the same field every 4 years, and control volunteers
2. Buy blackleg resistant varieties that have been tested and certified blackleg-free and have a seed treatment (e.g. Helix Xtra)
3. If blackleg is discovered, consider applying fungicide (read and follow label instructions).

Some FAQs:

- What is blackleg?
  Blackleg is a disease of canola and other Brassica species caused by the fungus *Leptosphaeria maculans*. It can be a serious disease of canola and can cause significant yield losses in susceptible varieties.

- Has blackleg been found in WA State?
  No. However, the recent discovery of multiple fields in ID is a reminder of why we need to keep this disease out of Washington and other areas where the disease currently does not appear to be present. More than 20 fields have been scouted in 5 counties in WA and no signs of blackleg were found.

- Is blackleg only an issue in winter canola?
  No, Blackleg can impact any Brassica crop, e.g. spring canola, rapeseed, mustard, tillage radish, and also Brassica weeds. It can also be a major problem in vegetable brassicas - cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and especially the seed production of these crops in the Skagit Valley of Washington. This disease could have a major impact on this industry.

- Should I scout my field? What if my canola winterkilled? And what should I look for?
  Definitely! Blackleg symptoms can be found on growing plants, winterkilled residue and residue from crops one and two years prior. For winter canola, look for lesions on primarily the lower leaves and leaf material that died back during the winter. The center of the lesions will have tiny black specks (pycnidia) (see photos below). The pycnidia may also be present on canola residue/stalks from previous crops. The lesions may be small and tricky to spot; be willing to get a close look near the base of the plants. If you had a cover crop containing Brassica species that residue should also be observed.

- Should I go ahead and apply a fungicide just to be safe?
  Not necessarily. Resistant or moderately resistant varieties should stop the disease if and when it enters the vascular (stem) tissue. In susceptible varieties, fungicide will help prevent non-infected plants from getting infected, but won’t kill the disease established in the plant if it’s already present.

- How do I know if the seed I buy has been tested and certified blackleg free?
  The WA State Dept. of Agriculture is in the process of a Rule Change to require ALL Brassica crops or cover crops containing Brassicas go through testing, seed treatment and certification.
The certification must be clearly marked on any Brassica seed sold for any purpose. That is on track to take effect by June or July.

- Where can I find more information? The WA Oilseed Cropping Systems website (www.css.wsu.edu/biofuels) has resources listed ranging from sampling protocol to a presentation about blackleg by WSU seed pathologist Dr. Lindsey du Toit.

- Are there WSU/USDA-ARS people available to meet me at my fields to scout together? Yes, several contacts are listed on the WOCS website (Tim Paulitz, Karen Sowers, Jim Davis, Don Wysocki). Also consider contacting your crop consultant, seed salesman, or your WSU County Extension Educator.

From Tim Paulitz, USDA-ARS plant pathologist in Pullman, “The more eyes we have out there, the better. I think the reason it went undetected in the Camas Prairie is that no one was looking for it. Let’s not let it get away in Washington!”