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Dog sleuths sniff out crop disease hitting US citrus trees



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In this April 2016 photo provided by the United States Department of Agriculture, detector canine 'Bello' works in a citrus orchard in Texas, searching for citrus greening disease, a bacteria that is spread by a tiny insect that feeds on citrus trees. (Gavin Poole/USDA via AP)

CHRISTINA LARSON



WASHINGTON - Dog detectives might be able to help save ailing citrus groves, research published Monday suggests.

Scientists trained dogs to sniff out a crop disease called citrus greening that has hit orange, lemon and grapefruit orchards in Florida, California and Texas. The dogs can detect it weeks to years before it shows up on tree leaves and roots, the researchers report.



"This technology is thousands of years old – the dog's nose," said Timothy Gottwald, a researcher with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a co-author of the study. "We've just trained dogs to hunt new prey: the bacteria that causes a very damaging crop disease."

Dog sleuths are also faster, cheaper and more accurate than people collecting hundreds of leaves for lab analysis, according to the study in the Proceedings of National Academies of Sciences. Citrus greening - also called huanglongbing - is caused by a bacteria that is spread by a tiny insect that feeds on the leaves and stems of citrus trees. Once a tree is infected, there's no cure.

The disease has also hurt citrus crops in Central and South America and Asia.