

Plant Inspection Stations

Americans have grown accustomed to choosing from a large and healthy selection of plants from around the world when they go to their local nursery. Yet, most people are not aware of the careful safeguarding measures in place to ensure these plants are free from harmful invasive pests and diseases. These invasive pests and diseases not only threaten home gardens and landscapes, but can cause billions of dollars in damage to America's agriculture and natural resources.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is charged with safeguarding agriculture and natural resources from the risks associated with the entry, establishment, and spread of exotic plant pests, diseases, pathogens, and noxious weeds. To carry out this mission, APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) plant health safeguarding specialists inspect plants at the 17 plant inspection stations located at ports of entry throughout the country, including major international airports and seaports and key crossings along the U.S.-Mexican border.

Each year, plant health safeguarding specialists inspect a huge volume of plants that are mailed, carried, and shipped into the United States by brokers, travelers, and nursery owners. The specialists review all associated permits and documentation to ensure that these shipments comply with import regulations and that any pest or disease risks are sufficiently mitigated. They also help enforce the rules and regulations that apply to the import and export of plant species protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

FY 2009 PPQ Inspection Statistics

- 1.6 billion nonendangered plants inspected
- 178 million endangered plants inspected
- 3 million kg of seeds inspected
- 3,700 quarantine significant pests intercepted
- 25 million plants treated
- 14,000 kg of seeds treated

Discovering a Plant Pest, Disease, or Weed

When a shipment of plants arrives at a plant inspection station, specialists collect phytosanitary certificates from the importer and begin the inspection. Typically, inspectors examine samples taken from each variety of the imported plant and seed. The inspection process includes a thorough examination of the leaves, stems, roots, and seeds of the plant. Plants must not be rooted in growing media, with the exception of only a few specified types. Growing media, such as soil, can contain harmful insects, diseases, and noxious weeds.

If the inspector discovers a pest, disease, or noxious weed in or on an imported plant or seed, they ensure that an accurate identification is made as soon as possible. They refer all interceptions to the appropriate technical specialists, known as identifiers, who closely examine the samples. If an identifier determines that the detected organism is not harmful and poses no economic threat to U.S. agriculture, the plants are released to the importer.

If an identifier determines that an organism is actionable, meaning it is a known plant pest and does not exist in the United States or it exists in limited distribution, the plants will either undergo a quarantine treatment, are re-exported, or are destroyed.

CITES Enforcement

All 17 PPQ plant inspection stations have been approved by the U.S. Department of Interior to inspect plants protected by CITES. CITES is a comprehensive international treaty that regulates the commercial trade of endangered species and monitors the trade of species that are at risk of becoming endangered.

At plant inspection stations, every shipment containing CITES-listed plants is inspected to ensure that it matches the description in the accompanying CITES documents. If importers do not have the proper CITES documentation, the specialist offers the plants back to the country of origin or places the plants in a designated plant rescue center in the United States. At the plant rescue center, the plants are grown for research, breeding, or educational purposes.

To learn more about CITES-protected species, visit www.cites.org/eng/app/index.shtml. For a list of required documents and designated ports, check the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/cites_endangered_plants.shtml.

Plant Germplasm Inspection Station

PPQ also operates the National Plant Germplasm Inspection Station in Beltsville, MD, as part of the National Plant Germplasm Quarantine Center. This specialized facility is uniquely designed to handle imported plant germplasm and other valuable plant materials for noncommercial plant breeding and research programs that, because of pest and disease risk, would not normally be permitted into the United States. These items must enter the United States under a departmental permit and are sent to the inspection station in Beltsville. There, they are examined and, if necessary, treated before being allowed to move to the approved facility identified on the departmental permit.

Permits

To import foreign plants and seeds, an importer must apply for an agricultural import permit from PPQ's Permit Services and obtain a phytosanitary certificate from the exporting country. Phytosanitary certificates verify that plant quarantine officials from the exporting country have examined the plants for pests and diseases prior to export. The certificates also identify the plants by their scientific names and confirm that the shipment meets U.S. regulations for importation.

U.S. importers should obtain agricultural permits for shipments far in advance of their transport. Importers may request a permit by contacting PPQ's Permit Services. Mailing address:

USDA-APHIS-PPQ

Permit Services

4700 River Road, Unit 133

Riverdale, MD 20737

Telephone: (877) 770-5990 (toll-free)

Importers can also apply for and receive permits online through the ePermits system. This system is a Web-based tool that allows importers to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it on the Internet. The ePermits system also enables Federal regulatory officials to issue, track, and rapidly verify the validity of import permits. The system minimizes the time it takes to complete permit applications, process the data, and issue permits.

First-time applicants should note the ePermits system requires users to first be verified by eAuthentication. eAuthentication is a registration process that enables customers to access USDA Web applications and services via the Internet. This process can take up to 1 month, so applicants should plan accordingly.

To learn more about ePermits, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/permits/learn_epermits.shtml.

For specific information on plant and plant product permits, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/permits/plantproducts.shtml.

Ways to Import Plants, Plant Products, and Seeds

Plants, plant products, and seeds may be imported into the United States either by mail, freight, or passenger baggage.

A customs broker is required at the importer's expense to arrange for freight, cargo, or unaccompanied baggage shipments. Instructions for importation through mail shipments or passenger baggage are listed below.

Mail Shipments:

Importers may mail plants and plant products directly to a plant inspection station. PPQ strongly recommends the following procedures for mailing plants:

1. Pack the plants in sturdy boxes or crates.
2. Indicate what is inside the package, as well as its origin, by clearly marking the outside of the package.
3. Use APHIS' green and yellow mailing label, issued with the PPQ permit, on the outside of the package. This will ensure proper handling of the package.
4. Include your name, address, telephone number, and permit number with the package so that inspectors can forward the package to you after inspection.
5. Enclose the original phytosanitary certificate issued by the national plant protection service of the exporting country.

Passenger Baggage:

Importers may bring in up to 12 soil-free plants and seeds of herbaceous plants that are not subject to prohibition or special requirements such as a permit, treatment, or ESA or CITES documentation. To import more than 12 plants, an importer must have a written permit and the plants must enter the United States at a port with a USDA plant inspection station. All quantities of plants or seeds must be accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate from the exporting country unless the importer has been granted a USDA import permit exempting such documentation.

Help Safeguard American Agriculture from Pests and Diseases

Whether you are mailing a boxwood from England, carrying propagated orchids back from Thailand, or shipping a load of philodendrons from Central America, you must follow USDA's procedures for

importing plants and plant products. By following these procedures, you will help protect American agriculture and natural resources from foreign plant pests and diseases.

Additional Information

For more information about plant inspection stations, please visit the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.gov/import_export/plants/plants_imports/plant_inspection_stations.shtml.

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