

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Plant Inspection Stations

Americans have grown accustomed to seeing a large and healthy selection of plants when they go to their local nursery to purchase a leafy Ficus tree or an exotic plant. However, most people are not aware of the long journey that their new plant has taken from its foreign home and of the careful measures the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has in place to ensure it is free of pests and diseases.

Each year, plant health safeguarding specialists inspect a huge volume of plants that are mailed, carried, and shipped into this country by brokers, travelers, and nursery owners. In fiscal year (FY) 2006 alone, more than 1.3 billion plants were imported into the United States. Such imports go through a series of overlapping safeguarding measures before entry into the United States to prevent against the introduction of exotic pests and diseases like the Asian longhorned beetle and Chrysanthemum white rust that can threaten U.S. agriculture and natural resources.

Once the commodities arrive in the United States, specialists with APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program perform their own inspections of these plants, cuttings, and seeds and review all associated permits and documentation to ensure compliance with import regulations and that any pest or disease risks are sufficiently mitigated. To assist in this effort, PPQ has established 17 plant inspection stations located throughout the country at major international airports and seaports and at major crossings along the U.S.-Mexican border.

APHIS-PPQ is charged with safeguarding agricultural and natural resources from the risks associated with the entry, establishment, or spread of exotic plant pests, diseases, pathogens, and noxious weeds. This important mission is carried out through regulating the importation of plants, seeds, and other plant products into the United States according to international standards. At APHIS' plant inspection stations, PPQ also enforces 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 2006 PPQ Inspection Statistics

- More than 1.3 billion nonendangered plants inspected;
- More than 33 million endangered plants inspected;
- More than 1.4 million kgs of seeds inspected;
- Intercepted more than 3,300 quarantine significant pests or diseases;
- More than 17 million plants treated;
- More than 15,000 kgs of seeds treated.

Plant Germplasm Inspection Station

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

Importing Plants and Seeds

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. Import permits may be requested using the following contact information:

USDA-APHIS-PPQ

Permit Unit

4700 River Road, Unit 133

Riverdale, MD 20737

Toll-free number: (877) 770-5990

Importers can also apply for and receive permits online through a system known as ePermits. The ePermits system is a Web-based tool that allows you to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it on the Internet. The ePermits system, which is being released in multiple phases, 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 the permits. To find out which permits are available online, please visit <<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/permits>>.

When a shipment arrives at a PPQ plant inspection station, plant health safeguarding specialists collect phytosanitary certificates from the importer. 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. With the exception of only a few specified types, plants must not be rooted in growing media, such as soil, because it could contain harmful insects, diseases, and noxious weeds. Inspectors also ensure that the plants are a manageable size for the inspection process.

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.

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, to 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 where clearance will take place. 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.

For importations other than the above, a customs broker is required—at the importer's expense—to arrange for freight, cargo, or unaccompanied baggage shipments.

For more information, please visit <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/permits/plantproducts/nursery.html> or call toll-free at (877) 770-5990.

Discovering a Plant Pest, Disease, or Weed

When plant health safeguarding specialists discover 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 such 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 undergo a quarantine treatment, are reexported, or are destroyed. If the plants require fumigation treatment, the PPQ specialist releases the plants for entry into the United States only after the treatment is completed.

CITES Enforcement

All 17 PPQ plant inspection stations have been approved by the Department of Interior to inspect plants, such as exotic orchids or cacti, that are protected by CITES. Signed by more than 150 countries, including the United States, 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. Since the treaty's ratification in 1974, CITES representatives have worked tirelessly to protect the world's plant and animal resources.

At PPQ's plant inspection stations, every shipment containing CITES-listed plants is inspected to ensure that it matches the description in the accompanying CITES documents. If the importers do not have the proper CITES documentation, PPQ specialists seize the plants and offer them back to their country of origin at that country's expense or place the plants in one of the many designated plant rescue centers in the United States. There they are grown for research, breeding, or educational purposes.

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 from foreign plant pests and diseases.

Additional Information

For more information or to find out where APHIS' plant inspection stations are located, please visit the APHIS Web site at
<<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/permits/plantproducts/pis/html>>.

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