

# Integrated Management of White Mold on Vegetables in Florida<sup>1</sup>

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## Host Range

Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, cabbage, carrot, collards, eggplant, green beans, lettuce, pepper, potato, squash, melon and other cucurbits, and tomato are some of the vegetable crops grown in Florida that are susceptible to one of several *Sclerotinia* spp. that cause a disease often referred to as white mold (Figures 1 and 2). Collectively, *Sclerotinia* spp. can cause disease in more than 400 plant species. Lettuce drop, head rot of cabbage (Figure 3), *Sclerotinia* stem rot of collards (Figure 4), *Sclerotinia* crown and root rot, pink rot, and watery soft rot are other common names of diseases caused by *Sclerotinia* spp., and they are often descriptive of the symptoms.



Figure 1. White mold of tomato caused by *Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 2. White mold of bell pepper caused by *S. sclerotiorum*.  
Credits: Tom Kucharek and Jeffrey A. Rollins

## Symptoms

White mold causes water-soaked lesions on the leaves and the crown of the plant (Figure 5), head rot (Figure 6), fruit rot (Figure 2), and stem rot on infected vegetables (Figure 7). The necrotic areas of the plant are often covered with a fluffy mass of white mycelia, as seen in cabbage (Figure 8), brussels sprouts (Figure 9), and tomato (Figure 10). The hyphae of the mycelium (mass of fungal strands) gradually

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aggregate together and condense with the accumulation of melanin to form dry structures called sclerotia (Figure 11).



Figure 3. Head rot of cabbage caused by *S. sclerotiorum*.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 4. Collards infected by *S. sclerotiorum* break off from the crown region.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 5. Water-soaked regions on the leaves and the head of cabbage leading to white mold growth.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret

The sclerotia can be seen attached to the mold-like mycelium that is formed on the infected area of the plant; upon severe infection, it is also visible on the soil line. The sclerotia are black in color and vary in size from a few millimeters to a centimeter (Figure 12). On brussels sprouts, the infected area takes on a unique bird's nest appearance at the top of the plant (Figure 13). Severe tissue degradation that leads to rotting is a major symptom in most of the vegetable crops infected by *S. sclerotiorum* (Figure 14). In some crops, like green beans, pepper, and tomato, mycelia are not always observed on the stem, but actually grow internally where sclerotia develop as well (Figure 15). The infected stems have a blighted appearance (Figure 16).



Figure 6. Head rot of cabbage caused by *S. sclerotiorum*.  
Credits: Hank Dankers



Figure 7. Stem rot and growth of *S. sclerotiorum* on collards.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret





Figure 8. Fluffy white mycelial growth on an outer leaf of *S. sclerotiorum*-infected cabbage.  
Credits: Hank Dankers



Figure 9. Brussels sprouts infected with *S. sclerotiorum*. The infection normally starts from the top of the plant.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 10. *S. sclerotiorum* growth and sclerotia formation on a tomato fruit with soft rot symptoms.  
Credits: Hank Dankers



Figure 11. The sclerotia (black in color) of *S. sclerotiorum* formed from the aggregation of the mycelial hyphae on a cabbage head.  
Credits: Nicholas S. Dufault



Figure 12. Sclerotia (black in color) of *S. sclerotiorum* from infected collards.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 13. Characteristic bird's nest appearance of brussels sprouts infected with *S. sclerotiorum*. Notice the white mycelial growth and sclerotia on the infected sprouts. Discoloration of the outer sheath of sprouts can also be seen.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret





Figure 14. A bell pepper field severely infected with *S. sclerotiorum*. Credits: Ken Pernezny



Figure 15. Mycelial spread and sclerotia formation inside the blighted stem of an *S. sclerotiorum*-infected pepper plant. Credits: Ken Pernezny



Figure 16. Stem blight of tomato caused by *S. sclerotiorum*. The plants exhibit wilting due to the infection. Credits: Mathews L. Paret

## Causal Agent

The ascomycete fungus *S. sclerotiorum* is the primary causal agent for white mold. In addition, two other species of *Sclerotinia*, *S. minor* and *S. trifoliorum*, are disease problems in the United States. *S. minor* is primarily a pathogen of lettuce, celery, carrot, and peanut; *S. trifoliorum* is known to infect green beans and legumes and is similar in biology and morphological characteristics to *S. sclerotiorum*. *S. sclerotiorum* produces large (2–10 mm in diameter) sclerotia, while *S. minor* produces smaller sclerotia (0.5–2 mm), and this is one of the distinguishing features. However, the major differentiation is the primary modes of infection used by these two species to infect a plant. *S. minor* infects by eruptively germinating sclerotia that are near the taproot system of the plant; therefore, it is primarily a soilborne organism. Spore production by *S. minor* is rarely seen in nature. Lesions mostly develop on the stem, followed by vascular invasion of the mycelium, which leads to plant wilt and collapse. In contrast, while *S. sclerotiorum* can also be soilborne, it primarily infects plants through airborne ascospores (Figure 17). The ascospores land on the plants and produce mycelia that invade the tissues rapidly, which leads to plant collapse.



Figure 17. Ascospores (circular in shape) inside the asci (the cylindrical saclike structure) that promote the aerial spread of *S. sclerotiorum*. Credits: Hank Dankers

## Disease Cycle

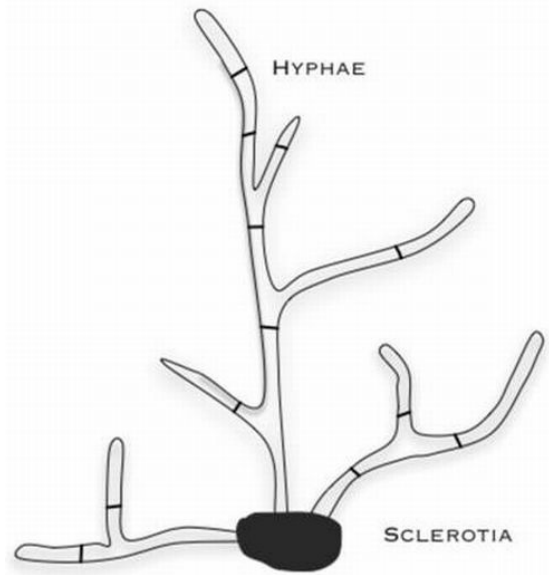
Sclerotia are the primary survival structure for *Sclerotinia* spp. and are capable of remaining dormant for several years (e.g., 5 to 7 years) in soil. The fungus can enter a field through various means, including contaminated seed and plant debris (Figure 18), movement of infected soil on farm equipment, and movement through surface water. Sclerotia overwinter and germinate, producing either mycelia that can directly infect the basal region of the stem of certain plants (this process is referred to as “mycelogenic



germination”; Figures 19b–23), or forming a small, mushroomlike fruiting body called an apothecium (this process is referred to as “carpogenic germination”; Figure 19a and 24). In carpogenic germination, the apothecium produces numerous asci that contain specialized spores known as ascospores, which are discharged and blown by wind to aerial portions of the plant. The ascospores produce mycelia that subsequently infect the plant.



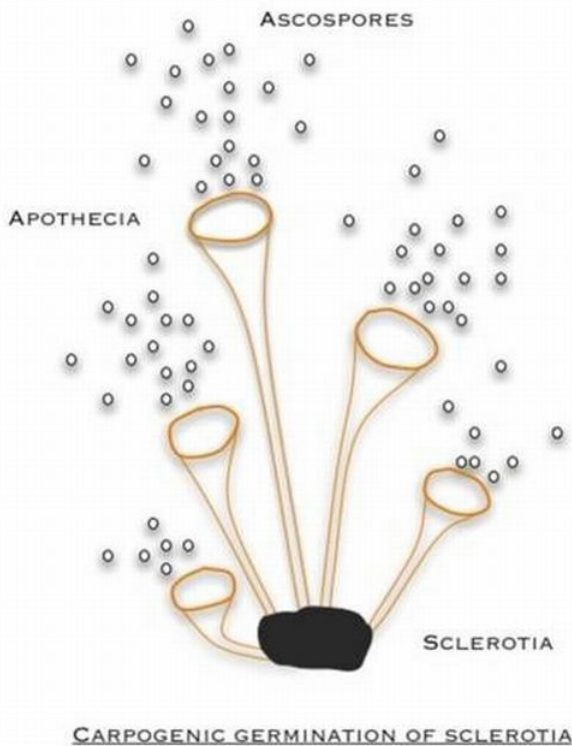
Figure 18. Survival of sclerotia on plant debris.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



**MYCELOGENIC GERMINATION OF SCLEROTIA**

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Figure 19b. Mycelogenic germination of sclerotia by formation of hyphae that invade the plants from below and beside the soil line.  
Note: Picture is not drawn to scale.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



**CARPOGENIC GERMINATION OF SCLEROTIA**

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Figure 19a. Carpogenic germination of sclerotia by formation of mushroomlike apothecia, which release ascospores into the environment that invade the aerial parts of the plant. Note: Picture is not drawn to scale.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 20. Growth of the mycelium, the vegetative part of *S. sclerotiorum*, from a dry sclerotium on an artificial medium.  
Credits: Mathews L. Paret

## Management

The first step in white mold management is avoiding the spread of the fungus through surface water, farm equipment, farm workers, and seed or planting material. An important aspect in the spread of the fungus is that each apothecium (Figures 17 and 24) releases millions of ascospores that are rapidly spread by wind. Therefore, vegetable fields should be monitored regularly for disease, recognizing that areas where white mold occurred previously are likely to be problematic in subsequent seasons. The disease

can be successfully managed by integrating the approaches described below.

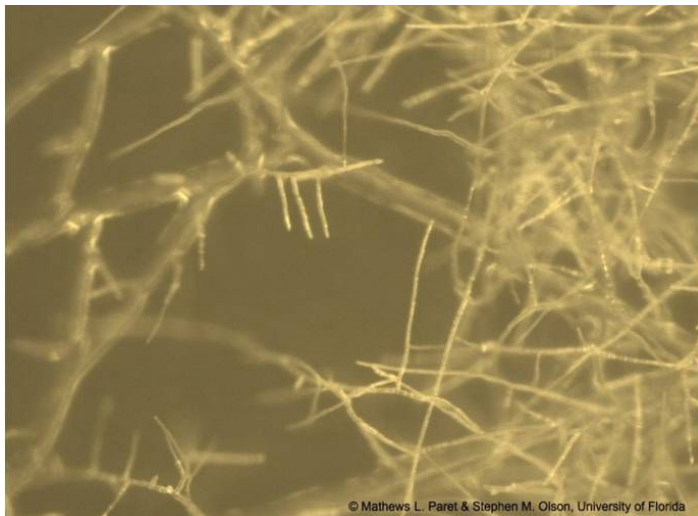


Figure 21. Network of fine white mycelial filaments called hyphae on an artificial medium.

Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 22. Aggregation of hyphae on an artificial medium.

Credits: Mathews L. Paret

## Field Plowing

Sclerotia of *S. sclerotiorum* can germinate carpogenically from depths of 4–5 cm below the soil line. Therefore, infested crop debris should be deep tilled with a moldboard plow before planting the next crop in the field. This will move the sclerotia into deep layers of the soil where they will not germinate. However, this is only a good management strategy for a single season, as subsequent tillage will bring buried sclerotia back to the surface in the next growing season.



Figure 23. Mature sclerotia with a melanized outer layer on an artificial medium.

Credits: Mathews L. Paret



Figure 24. Carpogenic germination of sclerotia producing mushroom-like apothecia on artificial media.

Credits: Nicholas S. Dufault

## Crop Density Management

Optimum row spacing of the plants must be kept to create a microclimate condition that is not favorable for survival of the fungus. In addition, varietal selection is important to prevent excessive overlap of the leaves of adjacent plants. This will ensure good airflow that will reduce high moisture conditions in vegetable production.

## Irrigation Management

Leaf moisture is a key aspect in the development of white mold. *S. sclerotiorum* spreads primarily during flowering or in the early stages of plant growth when ascospores can easily colonize the plant due to high levels of water on the leaves. The duration of leaf wetness should be reduced in vegetable cultivation under sprinkler irrigation systems. This can be achieved by initiating an early-morning irrigation schedule to allow sufficient time for the leaves to dry



during the day. Subsurface drip irrigation is known to be less conducive to disease development than furrow irrigation in the case of lettuce drop caused by *S. minor*. Previous studies indicate that the combination of high temperature, high soil moisture, and reduced oxygen in irrigated fields can reduce the survival of *Sclerotinia* spp.

## Crop Rotation

Because sclerotia can survive in soils for many years, crop rotation can only be successful if long-term rotation is practiced. Rotation with nonhost crops, such as corn, wheat, and sorghum, can reduce the number of viable sclerotia of *S. sclerotiorum* in the upper soil. In the case of lettuce drop caused by *S. minor*, rotation of broccoli with lettuce has been previously shown to reduce the number of sclerotia in the field. Canada thistle, Jerusalem artichoke, lambsquarters, mustard, nightshade, pigweed, ragweed, shepherd's purse, sow thistle, velvetleaf, and vetch are common weeds described before as hosts to *S. sclerotiorum* and should be eradicated from the production area of susceptible crops. The United States Department of Agriculture plants database (<http://plants.usda.gov/>) can be used to identify these weeds.

## Varietal Selection

Early-maturing varieties that have less of a tendency to spread should be selected when possible. Resistant sources to the white mold fungus in vegetables are scarce. However, high levels of resistance to *S. sclerotiorum* have been noticed in various *Capsicum* spp.

## Biological Control

Management of *S. sclerotiorum* using the fungus *Coniothyrium minitans* is effective in reducing the disease. Dried spores of this biological control agent can be sprayed on pathogen-infested plant debris at the end of a growing season and on soil before planting. The parasitized sclerotia produce fewer apothecia, which reduces disease incidence. *Streptomyces lydicus*, *Bacillus subtilis*, and *Bacillus pumilis* are other biological control agents that can be used for disease management. Biocontrol agents that are currently labeled for use in Florida are provided in the *Vegetable Production Handbook for Florida* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/CV/CV29500.pdf>).

## Chemical Control

Fungicides are available for chemical control and are labeled for use in some vegetable crops in Florida. Fungicides that are currently labeled for use in Florida are provided in

the *Vegetable Production Handbook for Florida* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/CV/CV29500.pdf>).

Control measures should be undertaken early in the season to reduce chances of severe infection and to reduce the buildup and carryover of sclerotia to the following season. An integrated management practice incorporating the various available cultural, biological, and chemical control methods is essential for the successful management of white mold on vegetable crops in Florida.

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