

# Is China Sowing The Seeds Of Our Destruction, Literally?

On July 24th, the Washington State Department of Agriculture issued a [Twitter warning](#) about packages of unidentified seeds, apparently originating from China, being sent to multiple Washington residents, unsolicited. The post set off a wave of similar announcements from a number of U.S. states, instructing recipients not to plant any seeds they did not order. The warnings sparked more reports, and it quickly became apparent that this was a national, even international, trend – with packages [reported so far](#) in 22 U.S. states, Canada, Australia, and the E.U.

Michael Wallace, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, informed *The American Conservative* that his department had “received hundreds of phone calls and more than 900 emails from residents, in Virginia and other states, who are reporting that they have received seeds that they did not order.” Heather Lansdowne of the Kansas Department of Agriculture likewise reported “hundreds of calls and emails,” though Kansas has not yet been able to determine how many unsolicited packages have been delivered to the state. At the time of a July 17th *Daily Mail* report, numbers in the U.K. were already in the hundreds. Oddly enough, Chris McGann, a spokesman for the Washington State Department of Agriculture – the first in the U.S. to report these deliveries – estimated only a dozen packages had been shipped to Washington, though the state was still receiving reports at the time of this comment.

State departments of agriculture have referred investigations to the USDA, who are collaborating with Customs and Border Protection. K. Cecilia Sequeira, a USDA spokesperson, acknowledged that “USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is aware that people across the country have

received unsolicited packages of seed from China in recent days.” USDA deputy administrator for the Plant Protection Program Osama el-Lissy announced on USDA Radio on July 29th that 14 of the hundreds of samples have been identified – hardly a reassuring number. CBP officials have not responded to multiple requests for comment.

By all appearances, something fishy is going on here. Jane Rupp of the Better Business Bureau thinks she has a simple answer. Rupp told [FOX 13](#) “the incidents could just be a scam known as ‘brushing’ where some companies will send you a product so they can post a fake review in your name.” Sequeira concurred by default, claiming “we don’t have any evidence indicating this is something other than a ‘brushing scam’ where people receive unsolicited items from a seller who then posts false customer reviews to boost sales.” Really?

The brushing theory fails to address a number of key details of the situation at hand. For instance, why would the packages be labelled as jewelry – an easy item to get past customs uninspected – and filled instead with seeds? If it’s just a matter of shipping an envelope with weight in order to post a verified review, China has no shortage of cheap jewelry to put in the mail. And why the sudden wave? Why would Chinese scammers suddenly decide to send seeds specifically to hundreds of people conveniently located in China’s rival nations?

Biologist Lawrence Roberge has a theory that holds more water than a simple online review scam – and it’s something he’s been warning about for years. Government notifications have focused on the potential damage of invasive species (remember, the foreign-originating seeds have still not been identified) and caution recipients not to plant any unsolicited seeds or even to open the packages they come in. What if this potential damage is exactly the point?

Dr. Roberge has been writing and speaking for the better part

of a decade on the potential for non-indigenous species to be employed as a form of biological weapon by hostile actors. There is substantial evidence to suggest that we may be watching just such an attack play out in real time.

One key factor is broad dispersal: hundreds or thousands of propagules shipped to numerous locations nationwide. Roberge warns that such a broad dispersal can be effective even if no recipients plant the non-indigenous seeds, as there is substantial risk that unsolicited shipments will be “dumped in the trash, only to proliferate in dumps or trash heaps,” he told *The American Conservative*. Beside that, there is potential for significant harm from unplanted seeds as “some attacks can come from the fungal spores on the seeds or bacterial or fungal cells on the surface or inside the seeds.” Government warnings not to plant the seeds have made their way through the population, and most recipients will surely follow the publicized instructions. But this may not be enough.

The admittedly unthreatening appearance of a packet of seeds in the mail may cause many to dismiss the possibility of real danger. But Roberge expressed concern that, while the U.S. is well equipped to defend human targets against biological threats, we are “poorly prepared for agricultural or environmental bioweapons.” “We are very vulnerable to such an attack,” he said.

Roberge says he was, “recently working on a portable infrared analyzer for the detection and identification of various bioweapons seeds.” But the rest of us may have been shortsighted: “Sadly,” he says, “it seems funding for this type of research only occurs after the attack.”

The consequences of the attack (if that is what this is) could play out just as unceremoniously as its arrival: “it could be several years. . . depending on the target crops, ecological targets, or if the organisms are directed to hurt humans in economic agricultural targets or disturb ecosystems,” Roberge

added. We may never even know what hit us. It could be as simple as an accelerated decline of our already waning American farms.

Or it could be nothing. It could be that a handful of scammers were feeling whimsical one day and decided to ship hundreds of packages of seeds instead of jewelry, apparently confident that the swap-out would not draw attention to their racket. (They would, of course, have been wildly wrong; this theory hinges on our hypothetical scammers being incredibly stupid.) But there is enough going on here to raise concern, and to expect more urgency and transparency from the USDA than we've been getting.

If 2020 has taught us one very specific lesson, it's that biological imports from China – perhaps especially *accidental* ones – are not to be taken lightly.

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