

Transgenic potatoes

A borrowed alfalfa gene has helped potatoes fight off a fungus that causes one type of potato blight. In the United States, researchers at Monsanto – an 85 per cent owned subsidiary of Pharmacia Corp. – have done commendable work in this regard. Many crops are now engineered to produce *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), which some plants make naturally to fight insects. However, nothing has been found to work against fungi, which can devastate potatoes.

Developing nations are turning to potatoes as they can be harvested in as little as 90 days. According to the International Potato Centre in Peru, late blight caused by the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, costs potato growers about US\$3 billion a year. Another fungus that causes early blight costs an estimated US\$21- US\$44 million to control in Canada and the United States alone. (The Economic Times, 13 February 2001)