

Latvia investigates unauthorized GMO tomato seedlings as debate over gene-edited crops intensifies

18 June 2026 | News

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Latvian authorities have uncovered the sale of unauthorized genetically modified tomato seedlings, prompting regulatory action and renewed debate over the future of biotechnology in European agriculture. The State Plant Protection Service (SPPS) confirmed that genetically modified Norfolk Purple tomato seedlings—developed by U.S.-based biotechnology company Norfolk Healthy Produce—were being distributed in Latvia despite European Union restrictions on the cultivation and circulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The discovery followed complaints lodged by visitors to the “Garden and Lifestyle 2026” exhibition, where the seedlings were reportedly offered for sale. Subsequent inspections traced the plants to a private collector who had sourced the material from the United States. Known for their distinctive deep-purple flesh and skin, Norfolk Purple tomatoes were engineered to contain elevated levels of anthocyanins, plant compounds associated with antioxidant properties. Unlike conventional purple tomato varieties, the pigmentation extends throughout the fruit due to genetic modifications involving genes derived from snapdragon flowers.

While the variety is authorized for commercialization in the United States, it does not meet current regulatory requirements governing GMO cultivation and distribution within the European Union. Authorities said the growers involved have voluntarily destroyed the remaining plant material, although monitoring and investigations remain ongoing. Officials are also urging anyone who purchased the seedlings or seeds through exhibitions or other channels to refrain from planting, distributing or propagating them and to dispose of the material appropriately.

The incident has drawn particular attention from Latvia's organic farming sector. According to the SPPS, the presence of unauthorized GMO material within organic production systems could jeopardize certification status and create compliance challenges for growers operating under strict organic standards. Liena Jaunzeme, Head of the Seed Control Department at the State Plant Protection Service, noted that while environmental risks from the tomatoes appear limited under Latvian growing conditions, the introduction of genetically modified material into organic supply chains remains a significant concern.

At the same time, the case has reopened broader discussions about Europe's regulatory stance on biotechnology. Horticulture specialist Māra Gailāte argued that advances in gene-editing technologies could help accelerate the development of crop varieties with improved resistance to diseases, pests and climate-related stresses. While emphasizing the importance of complying with existing laws, she suggested that European regulators may eventually need to reconsider current restrictions to support agricultural innovation.

Others remain cautious. Representatives of Latvia's organic agriculture community warned that widespread adoption of genetically modified crops could increase market concentration and reduce genetic diversity within agricultural systems. They emphasized the importance of maintaining transparent labeling and oversight mechanisms to ensure consumer choice and preserve confidence in organic production. Under Latvia's Law on the Circulation of Genetically Modified Organisms, individuals and organizations found distributing unauthorized GMOs may face administrative penalties and financial sanctions. Authorities indicated that enforcement measures related to the current case are still under review.

The incident is considered highly unusual in Latvia, where unauthorized GMO cases remain rare. However, it highlights the growing challenge regulators face as biotechnology innovations become more accessible globally and increasingly intersect with seed exchange networks, hobbyist growers and international horticultural markets. As Europe continues to debate the future of gene-edited crops and agricultural biotechnology, the Norfolk Purple tomato case underscores the widening gap between rapidly advancing innovation and regulatory frameworks that are struggling to keep pace.