

The December 29, 1981 issue of *Wall Street Journal* carries on page 1 a story about an incurable disease that has killed 8,288 palm trees – more than one out of five – in the Palm Beach, Florida, area. The disease is called "lethal yellowing" and it was first reported in Jamaica at the turn of the last century. The malady struck Miami's palms in 1971, then moved north, having killed so far an estimated 1.5 million South Florida palms, or about 80 percent of those trees.

The *Journal* describes the controversy that has erupted over treatment. A Miami nurseryman asserts that the spray he developed – a mixture of fertilizer and insecticide – controls the disease 98 percent of the time. Scientists have been unable to duplicate his success with the mixture.

One Californian, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, "confided that he knew of the three remaining locations of 'earth dust' – the dust from which God created man. For plane fare, he said, he would deliver the healing substance. Sprinkling the palm trees with it, he said, would rid them of what he called their leprosy virus. His offer was spurned."

Investigators are blaming spread of the disease on a mycoplasma – a microorganism smaller than a bacterium and larger than a virus and spread by the quarter-inch leaf hopper – a tiny green insect that feeds on the trees' circulatory systems. In this respect, lethal yellowing follows the pattern of Dutch elm disease with its bark beetle vectors.

University of Florida scientists have devised a counterattack, their main weapon being tetracycline, an antibiotic. Healthy trees injected with it seem to show diminished chances of catching the disease.