

Expert tells how to stop problems with tomatoes

NEWARK, DE — Tomatoes are close to the heart of most gardeners. They're usually easy to grow, providing satisfaction for young and old alike. But how frustrating to look at a juicy red tomato only to find that the bottom has rotted, or to watch the big green vines slowly wither away to nothing — just as their first fruits begin to mature.

With a little extra care, home gardeners can prevent most tomato problems, says Delaware State College extension agent Glenn Layton. He offers the following practical advice for recognizing and correcting — or better yet, preventing — some of the more common problems.

Blossom Drop — Early season blossoms sometimes fall off as a result of cool night temperatures (below 55 degrees F). During summer months, some blossom drop may also occur when temperatures exceed 75 degrees. Unfortunately, says Layton, there's little one can do about the temperature except plant at the proper time.

Blossom End Rot — This condition, which affects both green and ripe tomatoes, is prevalent on the bottom or blossom end where it appears as a large dry, darkened area. It's usually more of a problem on the earliest fruits of the season and generally results from moisture stress caused by hot, dry summer weather while the plant is actively growing.

Home gardeners can prevent blossom end rot by keeping their plants evenly moist, the extension agent says. Mulching with plastic, straw, bark, dry grass clippings or newspaper will also aid in prevention.

Cracking — Following a dry spell, warm rainy days may make the tomatoes crack if they expand too fast as they take on more water.

Early Blight and Light Blight — Both these diseases are caused by fungi which release wind-blown spores. They can infect plants rapidly when conditions are right for their development.

Early blight (also called target-spot) first appears as small,

irregular, dark brown spots on the leaves. These enlarge into circular spots with target-like markings. Lower leaves are attacked first. The leaf tissue around the spots turns yellow, and when the disease is severe, leaves fall off. If not controlled in the leaf stage, stems and fruit may also be infected. Fruits will develop dark leathery spots near the stem end. Heavy dew or rain favor early blight. Plants already in poor vigor are most susceptible.

Plants infected with late blight first develop greenish-black, water-soaked blotches on the leaves. Under moist conditions, these blotches enlarge rapidly. A white, fuzzy fungus growth may also be seen on the undersides of leaves. Infected plants eventually wither and die. Elongated black cankers develop on the stem and leaf stalks. Water-soaked spots develop on fruit, enlarging rapidly and turning a blotchy greenish-brown. A whitish mold may cover the infected tissue during moist weather. Late blight is favored by rainy, foggy weather, Layton says.

To prevent these diseases, plant resistant, adapted varieties. Use only disease-free transplants. And follow a regular fungicide spray schedule.

2, 4-D Injury — Tomatoes are extremely sensitive to 2,4-D weed killer, Fumes and spray drift may injure plants a half mile or more away. Symptoms include curled, twisted and distorted leaves and stems. Leaf margins become wavy and frilled. Some blossoms drop without setting fruit. Tomato fruits may crack open or develop cat face — severe cracking or scarring on the blossom end. (Cool weather is also believed to contribute to cat face on tomatoes).

To prevent herbicide injury, don't use 2,4-D near the garden area, or spray on windy days. Always use a separate sprayer for fungicides and insecticides than that used for weed killers.

Soil Rot — This condition is caused by fungi which are widespread and commonly present in the soil. It frequently occurs when fruits lie on the ground, especially when rain or irrigation water repeatedly splashes soil on them.

Under these conditions, tomatoes develop large, rotten spots which are sometimes sunken and may have alternating bands of light and dark brown color. As the spots enlarge, they frequently crack and break open.

To prevent losses from soil rot, grow plants in well-drained soil, using a mulch or staking plants to keep fruit from touching the ground. If necessary, follow a regular spray schedule.

Sunscald — This problem occurs during hot, dry weather, especially on staked tomatoes. Large, whitish or tan, slightly sunken areas appear on the fruit. Mold often develops on the surface of affected areas and the entire fruit may later rot.

To prevent sunscald, water and fertilize plants to keep them vigorous. Handle fruit carefully.

Wilt Diseases — These diseases are caused primarily by two soil-borne fungi, Fusarium and Verticillium, which invade plants through the root system.

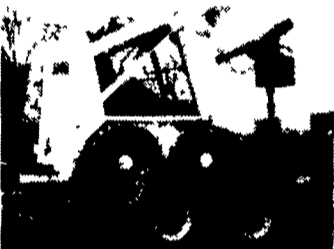
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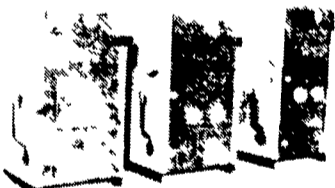
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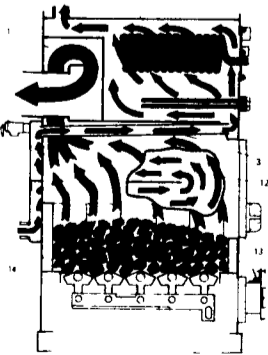
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