

Dealing with Tomato Problems

There's no doubt that tomatoes are the king of the vegetable garden. They are our favorite to grow and to eat. Most of the time, tomatoes are rather easy to grow but there are many disease organisms doing their best to ruin our best efforts. The phone is ringing at a fast pace and as usual tomatoes questions are common. Since there are so many diseases of tomatoes I'll try to cover the most common ones over the next few weeks.

Blossom End Rot – I'll start with this one because it is quite common and easily avoided. I always find a way to harp on the importance of soil testing. If the pH of the garden soil is too low, calcium is not available to the plant. As many know, blossom-end rot causes the blossom end of the fruit to rot. Although often worse on the first fruit cluster, it can be a problem throughout the growing season. The rot is dark brown in color and has a tough leathery feel. Dry weather also contributes to the problem. A foliar application of calcium chloride can help but checking the pH and applying appropriate lime can go a long way to avoid this common disorder (Tomato Saver, Stop Rot and Blossom End Rot Preventer). Start spraying when green tomatoes are about the size of a silver dollar and spray once a week for three to four weeks.

Early Blight - is actually a fungus disease that attacks the lower foliage of tomato plants, causing the leaves to turn yellow and wither. As the weather becomes warmer and more humid, the disease will move up the plant, infecting a major part of the tomato plant's foliage. By the end of the summer you may actually have single stalks and just a few green leaves at the top of your tomato plants.

Tomato plants infected with Early Blight disease often produce fewer flowers, thus, much less fruit as well. To control Early Blight, keep your tomato plants mulched well to prevent disease spores from splashing from the ground onto the lower foliage. Also, at the first indication of Early Blight disease on the foliage, pick those leaves off and destroy them. If the disease becomes severe, then spray tomato plants with a recommended garden fungicide, such as daconil or mancozeb.

Southern Blight - is a white mold that rots the stem at or slightly above or below the soil line. The plant then wilts or dies. Look for the cottony fungus growth and the light brown BB sized fruiting structures of the fungus. You may not see the fungus on infected plants when the weather is dry. Bury all plant residues before planting, plant vegetables farther apart, and treat with Terraclor at planting if you have a problem with Southern blight. Some people wrap the stem near the soil line with foil to slow this disease and to control cutworms. The foil must extend two inches above and below the soil line.

Next time I'll describe some of the serious wilt diseases that can devastate our tomatoes.