

## Southern blight of Vegetable Crops

Weather conditions each summer dictates to a large degree the type of diseases we see in the vegetable garden. This summer has been characterized by hot temperatures along with high humidity and rain. One vegetable disease that particularly likes these conditions is southern blight, also known as southern wilt and southern stem rot. Southern blight is caused by a fungus that lives in the soil. While most of my calls concerning this disease are on tomatoes it affects other vegetables such as bean, cantaloupe, carrot, pepper, potato, sweet potato, watermelon and others. In fact, farmers producing cotton, soybeans, peanuts and tobacco have problems with southern blight.

Plants affected with southern blight show wilting and yellowing of the leaves. If you pull the plants up, you will usually see stems rotted at the soil line. The “give away” that distinguishes this disease from others is the presence of white, moldy growth on stems and also on the soil next to the stems, along with tan to brown colored seed-like structures on the stem.

There is no fungicide that will stop this disease, so following good cultural practices is important. When you diagnose a plant, pull it up. This fungus survives in the top 2-3” of soil, so deep turning in the fall buries it along with plant debris. Each year, I remind gardeners of the importance of removing old, dead plants. Doing this and then deep turning goes a long way to avoiding problems next year.

If you have experienced a problem with southern blight this year, consider rotating corn into that area of the garden. Corn is one of the few vegetable plants that is not affected by this disease. If you have a small garden, you might want to consider wrapping the lower stems of transplants with aluminum foil to protect them from attack by the fungus. For larger gardens, this could be more labor intensive than is practical. If that is the case, there is a fungicide called Terraclor that can be used at planting. Finally, any of the foliar diseases can be lessened if you avoid throwing soil against the stems and lower leaves when cultivating and by removing leaves that have fallen onto the ground.