

Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus Strikes Again

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Most of us love home-grown tomatoes. But some of us who are trying to grow our own tomatoes have been running into problems the last few years.

It was in 1999 that Dr. Tim Momol, Plant Pathologist at the University of Florida IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center in Quincy, found tomato spotted wilt virus (TSWV) on a tomato plant from a Tallahassee gardener. Since then, many gardeners and commercial growers have been troubled by the tomato disease.

Symptoms of spotted wilt virus vary, but typically the young leaves turn slightly bronze-colored and later develop numerous small, dark spots. The growing tips of the plant may even die back. Affected plants also may have a one-sided growth habit. Or, they may be entirely stunted and have drooping, wilted leaves.

Plants infected early in the season may never produce fruit. Plants infected after fruit is set produce fruit with pale ring spots. Green fruit has slightly raised areas with faint concentric rings. On ripe fruit, these rings turn into obvious rings of red and white or red and yellow.

The disease is readily spread by thrips, small insects that most of us don't even notice. Because of the likelihood of spread, the infected plants should be immediately removed to prevent disease spread to healthy plants.

Unfortunately, tomatoes are susceptible to a number of diseases and it is very difficult to distinguish between the diseases just on the basis of visible symptoms. But if the new growth on your tomato plants has taken on a bronze cast and the plant seems wilted, it is a good possibility the plants have TSWV, and you should remove them. If the plants are not wilted and the new growth shows no bronzing, your plants may only have one of the leaf spot or blight diseases. Repeated sprays, according to label directions, of one of the vegetable fungicides available from your local garden center may help in the case of leaf spots or blights but not in the case of TSWV. Examples of fungicides include maneb, mancozeb, and chlorothalonil. Always read the pesticide label before purchasing the pesticide to be sure that it is the right product for the job.

If your tomato plants are wilting but have no discoloration of the new growth, they may have one of several other wilt diseases. Fungicide sprays will not help with any of the wilt diseases, though, and you will still lose the plants. However, the other common wilt diseases are not transmitted by insects, so with them there is no urgency to remove the plants.

If you are fortunate enough to have no tomato problems yet, be sure to keep your tomato plants watered on a regular basis during this drought. Fluctuations in soil moisture will lead to blossom-end rot of the fruit when it is formed. Tomato plants should also be fertilized lightly at least monthly for optimal production. You can even fertilize weekly if you use very low rates.

For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>. David W. Marshall is an extension agent in the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County. [[Back](#)]