

Tomatoes for the Fall Vegetable Garden



Photo from Pixlab.com: It's possible to grow a crop of fall tomatoes if you plant now. But, beware of the potential problems.

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If you want to grow tomatoes for the fall, August is the time to plant them. The basic production practices of growing tomatoes in the fall are the same as those in the spring. However, the fall gardener needs to be aware of some challenges and potential problems with growing tomatoes at this time of the year.

The biggest concern will be insect pests. Insect populations can build to very high levels in the fall due to the fact they have had several life cycles by this time. Caterpillar pests especially seem to be a perennial problem in the fall. The major caterpillar pests includes fruit worms, beet armyworms, and hornworms. Other armyworm species can also be a problem.

Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) compounds such as Dipel or Thuricide can be used to try and control caterpillar problems. Bt compounds must be eaten by the caterpillar to be effective, so thorough coverage of foliage is a must. These materials are also short-lived in the environment and must be reapplied on a 4 to 5 day interval under heavy caterpillar pressure. Under heavy caterpillar pressure, permethrin may also be used.

Another potential problem in fall tomatoes is whiteflies. If weather conditions turn dry, whiteflies can build to overwhelming numbers. This insect has sucking mouth parts. Both the adult and nymphs will damage the plants by sucking out plant sap. Under heavy infestations of whiteflies, distorted plant growth can occur. Whiteflies can cause the tomato fruit to ripen unevenly and leave deposits of sticky honeydew on foliage and fruit. Whiteflies also transmit the tomato yellow leaf curl virus which can devastate tomato plants. This virus is relatively new to the area, first being observed 4 to 5 years ago.

Low levels of whiteflies may be managed with regular applications (twice a week) of insecticidal soaps or oils. Once again, thorough coverage of foliage is required for the control methods to be effective. Under heavy whitefly pressure there is not much home vegetable gardeners can do to manage whiteflies.

Nematodes can be a problem in both spring and fall gardens. Nematodes are small worm-like animals that live in the soil and attack the root system of plants. The most common nematode in the area is root knot nematode.

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As the name implies these nematodes attack the root system, causing the roots to swell or knot. This causes the plant to be unable to transport water and nutrients and leads to the plants being stunted and off-color. Gardeners have limited options for control of nematodes. Some tomatoes varieties have limited resistance and may be used where there is a known root-knot nematode problem. Other options include rotation of the garden spot from year to year, using a grass cover crop between plantings, or keeping the garden fallow in the off years. The worst thing most gardeners can do is having the garden in the same location year after year.

Another fall tomato problem can be lack of fruit set due to high temperature which occur during the fall. Tomato fruit set is affected by both high day and nighttime temperatures. When daytime temperatures are above 90 degrees and the nighttime temperatures are above 70 degrees the number of tomato flowers and fruit set will be reduced. Most home garden tomato varieties are used mainly for spring production and will be affected by high temperatures in the fall. Some commercially grown varieties have been bred to withstand these higher temperatures. You may be able to get some of these heat-set varieties from your garden center. However; they generally have less flavor than most home garden varieties.

Hopefully, none of these problems will affect your fall tomatoes. However, it is best to know of the challenges ahead of time so that you will be prepared for them.

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