Problems Growing Tomatoes in North Florida

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There’s no tomato like a home-grown tomato! But, as anyone who grows tomatoes in north Florida soon finds out, there can be problems along the way.

A lot of the problems associated with growing tomatoes are related to weather. Of course, weather is beyond our control. So far this season we have been fairly fortunate to have good weather for growing tomatoes. But that can change at any time, as excessive rainfall can favor fungal diseases.

Some of the most common tomato diseases in this region include Early Blight, Late Blight, Gray Leaf Spot, Verticillium Wilt, Anthracnose, Fusarium Wilt and Blossom End Rot.

Early Blight affects the foliage, stem, and fruit of the tomato plant. The disease is characterized by dark spots with concentric circles starting on the older leaves. This disease overwinters in plant residue and is soil borne. Copper and sulfur based fungicides can help prevent the spread of this disease. When using fungicides, or any pesticide, make sure the label says it’s okay to use on tomatoes or vegetables.

Late Blight appears as a greasy, irregular shaped spot on the tomato leaf. Sometimes a white ring of mold will surround the spots. Copper fungicide sprays offer some control when used as a deterrent rather than a cure.

Gray Leaf Spot affects only the leaves of the tomato plant, starting with the oldest leaves. The spots enlarge and then turn grayish brown and eventually crack and fall out.

Verticillium Wilt is a soil borne fungus that is not plant selective. This fungus can survive in the soil for years, so crop rotation is one of your best lines of defense. The fungus causes the plant to wilt in the hottest time of the day and then recover in the night. It impairs the plant’s ability to take up nutrients and water, and it eventually kills the
plant. Many resistant varieties are available for this area. Most heirloom varieties have no resistance. There is no fungicide control.

Wilting foliage sometimes means a lack of water. But if the lower leaves are wilting and the plant does not recover after watering, the main suspect then would be Fusarium Wilt. Infected plants should be destroyed and never placed in the compost pile. As with Verticillium wilt, there is no fungicide control.

Anthracnose, another fungal disease that causes tomato fruit to rot, is very common in this area. It manifests itself as sunken spots on the fruit. These spots increase in size and darken in the center over time. This disease is soil borne and is splashed onto the fruit during rain or irrigation. Planting disease resistant varieties coupled with good management practices, including mulching, removal of lower leaves, and watering early in the day will help to keep this disease at bay.

Blossom End Rot, as the name suggests, are dark spots that starts at the blossom end of the fruit and enlarge, causing the fruit to rot. The cause of this disease is usually attributed to calcium deficiency during fruit set. But it can be brought on by too much nitrogen or uneven watering, especially when the plant is flowering. To protect your tomatoes, remove affected fruits and give regular deep watering, especially when the plants are flowering.

I have heard of a few cases where gardeners claimed that their tomato plants flourished but had few flowers. Or the flowers dropped before setting fruit. There are many possible causes for this, some of which include excess nitrogen, too little sunlight, or high nighttime temperatures.

Other tomato problems may be caused by nutrient deficiencies, diseases, insects and even mechanical injury. Make sure you assess the symptoms properly, then make the appropriate treatment. Most times good cultural practices, including proper irrigation, weed control, crop rotation, spacing for maximum air circulation, and keeping pets out of the garden area will greatly reduce your tomato problems.

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