WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY TOMATOES?

When the warm days of mid to late summer arrive, a bounty of tomatoes should fill our kitchens. Tomatoes are one of the most popular vegetables grown by the home gardener and gardeners always look forward to a good harvest. Sometimes gardeners are disappointed when their tomatoes do not live up to expectations. Insects or diseases do not cause some problems that occur on tomatoes; some type of stress factor in the growing environment usually brings about these physiological disorders. The following are some of the conditions that may show up on your tomatoes. Do not get too upset as it is rare for all the tomatoes on a plant to be affected!

CATFACING: Some tomato varieties, especially the "heirloom" varieties, frequently show scarring and malformation at the blossom end of the fruit. This condition is more common some years than others. Unseasonably cool, hot or wet weather while the plants are in bloom will result in cat-facing. The fruit are still edible, just bizarre looking. Usually the flavors of these heirlooms more than make up for their lack of perfection in shape!

CRACKS OR SPLITS: These appear a cracks or splits at the stem end and radiate from the stem or shoulder of the fruit. Cracking of tomatoes is most common during periods of wet weather and high temperatures that favor rapid growth. The tomato grows faster than the skin! Some varieties are more prone to cracking than others are. These fruits are also edible but should be picked and eaten quickly before decay organisms enter the fruit.

BLOTCHY RIPENING: Sometimes a tomato fruit will have areas in it that just do not seem to ripen. This may occur at the top of the fruit (green shoulders) or sometime hardened spots will develop on the inside. We do not know much about the cause of blotchy ripening but it is most common on tomatoes that have gone through irregular growth periods; extreme changes in the weather can speed up or slow down development and lead to blotchy ripening.

SUN SCALD: Bleached areas on the tomato fruit indicate sunscald. These areas are actually caused by sunburn on the fruit. Avoid removing foliage and exposing previously shaded fruit to the sun. Removing foliage not only cuts down on photosynthesis but also can lead to sunscald. Ripening of tomatoes is a function of temperature, not light.

BLOSSOM END ROT: Many gardeners are familiar with this condition. The symptoms are a darkening and rotting of the blossom end of the fruit. The initial cause is a localized lack of calcium in the developing fruit. Either extreme dryness or too much moisture can aggravate this. If the soil pH is low, liming will adjust it upwards as well as add calcium to the soil. Be sure to keep soil moisture levels even by deep soaking when you water and mulching to reduce evaporation of soil moisture. Tomatoes with blossom end rot are still edible if the bottom half of the fruit is removed.

If you have more tomatoes than you can eat, try oven drying and then freezing the extra bounty. Slice tomatoes in half or quarters, depending on size, and squeeze out the seeds. Place them on an oiled baking sheet with some garlic cloves, brush with oil and bake at 275F for a few hours. Freeze in pint freezer bags and enjoy the flavor of summer tomatoes in the dead of winter!

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