

Late Spring Garden Update



Written by: Kevin Milaeger
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As our tomato plants grow and the first flowers appear we must be wary of blossom end rot (BER.) This condition (it's not a disease), presents itself as a brown/black leathery patch on the "blossom end" of the tomato fruit. It happens when the fruit starts to form. Much has been written about this problem. If you do any searching for answers, I recommend you pay closest attention to articles that were written within the past few years, as current research has altered our views on the subject. BER seems to be caused by a lack of calcium during fruit formation. It's not just a matter of adding calcium to the soil. (Many tomato fertilizers have about 8% calcium.) That would seem like the obvious thing to do, but the problem is that tomato plants are unable to "take up" calcium if temperatures are too low. If June continues to be warmer than usual we may see less of the problem. Fingers crossed.



Kevin's Tomatoes at 2 weeks



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BER can be found on any kind of tomato, including cherry tomatoes, as well as peppers. It's most common on determinate tomatoes, and many types of "Roma" (paste) tomatoes. It's also much more common in the early part of the growing season, when temperatures are cool. After the tomatoes have started to form, I inspect them regularly, carefully examining their underside for signs of BER. At that stage, it usually looks like a faint, brownish bruise, but often very small. If I see that, I immediately pick and discard the fruit. I want the plant to start blooming again as soon as possible. I don't want it to waste energy on fruit that will never be any good.

I've had a few customers ask about reddish/purplish leaves on tomatoes. This has been the subject of online chatter in gardening groups, too. One of the chatterers suggested a nutrient deficiency, and a few others felt that was likely. Turns out they had submitted a leaf photo to a "what's wrong with my plant?" app and that was what the app determined. In a typical garden in mother earth, a serious nutrient deficiency is rare. Nutrient deficiencies are much more likely to be found in a greenhouse situation. In this case the cause was environmental. That is, very cool night temperatures. The purple leaves will turn green again, usually in two or three weeks. The plants will be stunted for a bit, but they will recover. I am wary about using apps for plant identification and to determine problems with plants. I put a plant ID app on my phone a few years ago and the first plant I tried to identify (as a test) was incorrect. I've since had more experiences like that. It's tempting for a new gardener to use apps, as they are very useful for other applications. But it's too easy to just accept what they tell you, and then act on that information. Also, it doesn't force us to examine a plant and really study it, so you'll remember it when you see something similar in the future. I see these apps in practice numerous times every day, and it's frightening to see how readily people believe what the app says. Another sign of the times.



Blossom End Rot (BER)



**New Born “Mini Munch”
Cucumber**

Cucumbers also love the warm weather. That’s why we recommend planting them after June 1st. This year, I talked with a number of customers who planted their cukes too early. That cold spell late in May did them in. They replanted and I haven’t heard any concerns since the warm spell. My own cukes are doing well. I have some at Milaeger’s office, and more at home, a couple miles east of Milaeger’s. The vines are all over 36” long, and flowering has been underway for a week. The biggest cukes are about 2” right now. I only grow the variety called ‘Mini Munch.’ It’s meant to be picked at no more than 5”. If you keep them picked, the vine will continue to produce. Last year I was picking them well into October. ‘Mini Munch’ is parthenocarpic. That means it naturally produces only female flowers, so every flower will produce a fruit, but it’s not genetically modified. Unfortunately the seed is very expensive, but to me it’s worth it.



Pepper in Flower



New Born “Giant Aconagua” Pepper

Pepper plants are also cold sensitive. I never plant them before Memorial Day. My peppers have thrived since planting during the first few days of June. All are blooming now. I only put in about a dozen plants, and a couple of those are extremely hot, so I just grow them for their looks. Occasionally I give some to a daring guest. One that I'm most intrigued with is billed as the longest sweet pepper there is. It is a tapered pepper called “Giant Aconagua”, with some fruits measuring 11”. I plan to keep it well watered to make sure that happens. I love the way peppers change color as they mature. Beautiful is not too strong a word.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!

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