

# *A New Tomato Problem*



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**I was forced to confront** a new tomato problem that I encountered this year in our trial garden. I now realize I'd seen the problem in years past, but so seldom that I didn't bother researching it. In early June of this year, I planted twenty tomato plants directly in the garden, not in pots like at home. In less than a week most of the plants took a turn for the worse. The growing tips were yellowish and looked stunted, distorted. The stems were dark, not the whole stem, but much of it. There was spotting on some of the leaves. That was the beginning. All the symptoms quickly worsened. I subsequently talked to customers who had the problem, and a couple of plants in my home garden had it.

I did the research and concluded that its called "tomato spotted wilt orthospovirus." Tomato insiders call it TSWV. It is introduced to perfectly good tomato plants by a tiny insect that carries the virus. The insect is a thrip. There are many kinds of thrip and all are nearly impossible to see with the naked eye. Once a plant is infected there is no hope. It should be removed from the garden and disposed of. Do not compost it. Sometimes the infected plant manages to produce fruit. But its ugly fruit. Unusual spotting that makes it appear unappetizing. I don't even want to touch it, much less eat it. Worse than cooties.



*Photo courtesy of Clemson University*



**TSWV on fruit**

## **TSWV**

The good news is that there are tomato varieties that are resistant to TSWV. This doesn't mean immune. Just less likely to contract the virus if exposed. We are already offering some of these. 'Better Boy,' 'Big Beef,' 'Celebrity,' and 'Galahad' are a few red slicers that are resistant. We'll continue to offer these. I'm still searching for more varieties that are resistant.

An obvious solution to this problem would be to control the thrips, but that's not so easy. There are a number of ornamental plants that are favored by thrips. Roses, impatiens, and verbena are a few common ones. It might be best to spray as a preventative, because if you wait until you confirm the presence of thrips, it would likely be too late. Thrips don't have an obvious presence, like, say Japanese beetles, so you wouldn't know they're there until the infestation becomes apparent. There is an easy-to-use spray called

“Take Down” that’s listed for thrips, and the label says it can be used on edibles. I haven’t tried it.



## Thrip control

Prior to this TSWV episode, early blight was the tomato disease that was most feared here in southeast Wisconsin. It usually shows up six or eight weeks into the growing season. When the fruit is starting to form and your mouth is starting to water, you notice a little yellowing on the bottom leaves of some of your plants. That’s usually



the first sign. Its a slow process. You can often get one or two fruit sets to mature before the plant succumbs.

Early blight is caused by a fungus. The fungus is found in soil, but can also be carried by other plants, especially some tomato relatives like the common nasty weed called nightshade. Moisture encourages blight. Water your plants in the morning, so any water that gets on the leaves will dry quickly. Better yet, just try not to get the leaves wet. After the plants are established, remove the lower branches so that when you do water, water isn't splashed onto the lower leaves that remain. If you want to go the next step, use a copper fungicide once you see the first symptoms. (The label says its safe for edibles.) This isn't a cure, but it can slow the progression of the problem. Reapply after rain.



**Early blight on tomato leaf**



**Blight control**

Despite the problems that can befall our gardens, there are plenty of bright spots to outweigh them. Twelve of my plants still look great and have fruit that will be ripe soon. About a week ago I was visiting my friend Bob in Williams Bay (west end of Lake Geneva.) His tomato plants looked great, and so did others in the community garden that he is part of. I also spoke with Carol, the manager of our Sunday Farmer's Market, and she said her tomatoes are the best she's ever had. That brightened my day, even if it was a vicarious pleasure.

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

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