



**Kevin Milaeger**

*Milaeger's*

## Tomatoes--- Early Summer Progress Report

Kevin Milaeger

While visiting an "up north" al fresco restaurant, I was admiring their flower garden when I overheard another patron say to a friend "This garden is well mulched so it hardly needs any care at all." I knew that wasn't true, so I chatted up the waitress and found out that "nearly every day" a quiet fellow came along and tended the garden. His diligence was obvious. Just a few minutes went by when he showed up! With his sun protecting hat, his belt of professional gardening tools, knee high boots, and sun burnt face (despite that hat), he was easy to spot.



**Door County restaurant garden**

I watched him for a while, his wiry frame darting around the garden, just touching many of the plants. There is no mistaking an ardent plantsman, a kindred spirit. On that particular day, the giant German iris were at their peak, so I asked him about a beautiful bronze variety near our table. He was happy to tell how he found it growing in a ditch in an area that was being developed---it would have been destroyed soon if he hadn't rescued it. In the fashion of gardeners everywhere, he then offered me a piece of it. A brief encounter like this is part of what makes gardening such a splendid activity, and I wanted



**Door County restaurant garden**

to share this little episode.

And now back to the veggies...

Now that the warm weather is here, the tomato plants have really started to grow. It's tempting to think there isn't much to do right now, but a daily check of the tomato garden is necessary---and fun! I recall last year at this time--- everything looked great, until it didn't. This year I am proactive with copper



fungicide, trying to ward off early disease problems that attack the leaves. The leaves collect energy from the sun, so their health is vital. Leaf diseases are best treated with a prophylactic method, rather than curative. The label on the fungicide says it is safe for organic gardening. Not entirely sure what that means, or how certain it is. Apparently, its government sanctioned, for what that's worth. It comes in an easy spray bottle, and all my tomato plants have now been sprayed once, and a couple I have given two doses. I remove any leaves that look "iffy," that is, overly chlorotic



**June 5th planting date**



**June 24th**

or spotted in a questionable way. Snapping them off is best, with a swift, clean break. If you use a clipper, you could transmit a disease from one plant to another. I have fertilized twice so far, once each with a liquid and a granular. The tallest plant is 'Jasper,' a red cherry that is now 50". Others are not far behind. I stopped removing any suckers, or axils, once the plants started flowering. I don't know of any scientific reason for doing it at that point, it just feels right. (Remember, on determinate and dwarf varieties you should not remove any suckers.)

But I just enjoy being in the garden, tending the plants. Like the restaurant gardener, I touch most of them,

sometimes tucking a stray stem inside the cage, looking for anything that seems irregular. At this time of year, check any early fruit for signs of blossom end rot (BER). This condition is evidenced by a black leathery patch on the bottom, or blossom end, of the fruit. When the fruit is green, it may be brown or black, but when the fruit starts to ripen, it is almost always black. If I see a fruit like this early on, I pick it and discard it--it will never be any good. I would rather the plant put its energy into new flower production (and therefore new fruit), rather than producing fruit that will not be edible. BER is a condition that occurs most often early in the season, so if it happens to you, just discard the fruit, knowing that future fruit will probably be free of the problem.



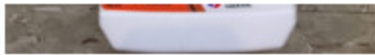
**problem leaves**

Soon, it will be the season for hornworms. For me, the last two years have been free of this pest, but many gardeners have spoken to me about this problem.



Tomato hornworms are about the size of your finger, and their color is almost identical to that of a tomato stem, so they can be hard to spot. Look for their droppings, or frass, which are black in color. Or look for chewed up leaves---the worms have a healthy appetite. I simply pick them off and place them on a "volunteer" tomato plant that sprouted in my garden on its own. That way I don't sacrifice my plants, and I can appreciate new beauty when the "worm"





**copper fungicide**

turns into a  
spectacular  
hawk moth.

It always bothers me a bit when I have someone ask me about how to make their garden "low maintenance." It's called gardening, that's what we do. It's an activity, not something you watch happen. Gardening is a process; you learn by doing. Enjoy the process, and the result. Take a walk around your neighborhood. No doubt you will see someone out gardening---engage them in conversation---most gardeners are happy to talk about their garden.



**tomato fertilizer**