



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

The Hypochondriacal Garden

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When asked about our health, most of us simply answer “it’s fine.” But if pressed, we might list a few problems—maybe a sore shoulder or knee, your arthritis is acting up, you have a rash that won’t go away, your medication doesn’t seem right—whatever. We all go through life dealing with various health issues, some much more serious than others, but somehow most of us get to old age.

Plants are not that different from us. I’ve never read the once-popular book by Jerry Baker called “Plants are Like People,” (1975), but I like the title. I use that phrase regularly, to help people better understand plants. For me, it makes a plant problem easier to talk about. Not every human ache and pain is a crisis, and we shouldn’t panic when a plant



Prairie Fire

doesn’t look quite right. But we should pay attention. It’s best not to get too alarmed about a twisted leaf, a little spot, an unknown insect. The life of a typical tomato plant is less than six months. Like us, they are not always completely healthy, but most manage to survive the six months. Our job as gardeners is fairly straightforward—manage as best we can the things that are under our control. Choose disease resistant varieties, plant at the proper time, water, fertilize, stake, prune, and possibly treat for disease, especially if your garden has a history of problems. What could be easier?



horizontal cracking

In our part of the world, most of the diseases that hinder tomato plants are fungal. I’ve sprayed my plants with copper fungicide a number of times, and now I am on a weekly regimen. I want to stay ahead of the problem. Last year I didn’t, and my garden suffered. If fungus has been a problem for you, you need to be proactive. It’s not that hard to do. Remember to reapply after a rain, and when

you are watering, keep water off the leaves. According to the label, you can apply the fungicide right up to harvest.

When tomatoes are ripening, we often see cracking of the skin. This doesn’t affect the

flavor, but it makes them unsuitable for any supermarket. Even farmer's markets would prefer their fruit not cracked. If the cracks are horizontal, the condition is genetic, and there is nothing you can do. If the cracking is vertical, it is environmental, and often related to watering, or the time of harvest. I prefer not to worry about it, the cracks don't bother me a bit. But if it bothers you, try picking the fruit earlier, and allowing it to ripen in your kitchen, but not in the fridge. The flavor will not be affected, nor will the nutritional value.



vertical cracking

My tomato plants look pretty good right now, and they are bearing well. But it took a while to get usable fruit. This has been the worst year for blossom end rot (BER) that I've ever experienced. From my ten plants, I must have discarded well over 50 large tomatoes.



blossom end rot (BER)

Fortunately, this condition is usually at its worst at the beginning of the season, so it is not really a problem anymore. But I'm still finding a few black bottomed fruits that I missed. We have discussed this problem in past blogs, and talked about many of the preventive measures, and folklore remedies. I think I've tried them all and nothing has worked. So, I wasn't too surprised when I came upon some new findings about this problem. I belong to a plant group on facebook, a group that is supposedly run by horticulture professors. It is very tightly run, but that's another story. They address all kinds of plant problems, and they always back up their statements with scientific studies. No folk remedies allowed. On

a recent post about BER, they said that the problem is not caused by calcium deficiencies, and that there seems to be nothing that can be done about it. They did mention that the problem is "linked" to the use of ammonia-based fertilizers—but that was far from definitive. The professors conclude that the cause of BER is environmental. That is, "low light temperatures, fluctuating temperatures, watering too often, etc." I'm sure there will be another study at some point, and new opinions will be touted, but this is the most up-to-date information out there. It doesn't really matter to me, and most of you—we will all continue to grow tomatoes. The group is called "Garden Professor's Blog" and anyone can join. You have to put up with their sometimes annoying rules and restrictions, but that might be a good thing.



Braveheart

Don't forget about Tomatomania! This free event is held at our Racine location on Saturday, September 7, from 11-3. The tomato tasting is free. We will be creating and serving many tomato-based foods and beverages than can be purchased with tickets. Stop in for some tomato fun!