



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Mid-June Tomato Report

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My home tomato plants are off to a great start this year. I waited until May 27 to plant them. At that time, the weather forecast for the following ten days called for night temperatures above 50 degrees, and that proved to be correct. So, my 22 tomato plants have grown uninterrupted; no stalling from cool weather. Each one is planted in a 15-gallon container with "Gardener's Gold" organic potting soil. I like a heavy soil, so the pots don't blow over when they get top heavy in late season. Bone meal was added to the soil to help control blossom end rot---about one hand trowel per pot. The plants were caged and labeled. After ten days of growing, they were given a dose of "Jobe's Organic Tomato and Vegetable" granular plant food. (Plants grown in soil "mixes" need more frequent fertilizer than those grown in mother earth.) I water every two or three days, depending on the weather. After the plants reached about 18", I pruned off the lowest stem---air flow at the base of the plants is a good thing. After another ten days, I trimmed off any other branches that were touching the soil.



Kevin Milaeger's home tomato plants 6/14/17

The debate wears on about whether it's a good idea to remove the axils from indeterminate (vine) tomato plants. The axils (also called suckers or feathers) are the secondary growths at the crotch formed by the main stem and a side stem. If left alone they will later produce fruit, but some gardeners feel they should be pruned out, to force the plant into taller growth, and earlier production. This is widely believed to be true, but there are tomato experts who are detractors. Craig LeHoullier, author of "Epic Tomatoes," for one. He says the presence of axils does not delay fruiting. Further, he claims that removal of axils hinders overall production. One thing is certain, unpruned plants require greater spacing between plants---the unpruned bushes will get





huge. Some gardeners, like me, take the

middle ground in this little controversy. I prune out the axils until the first fruit set, then I let them grow undisturbed for the rest of the season. I think if the results either way were clear cut there would be no argument. If we have a good tomato year, we will all have plenty, regardless of our pruning techniques. You may well wonder what large tomato farmers do? Surely, they would know if this technique worked or not. While homeowners generally prefer indeterminate (vine) tomatoes, large commercial growers grow determinate (bush) tomatoes, because they are easier for large scale production and mechanical harvest.



tomato axil

Because of their finite growth habit, determinate tomatoes don't benefit from axil removal. This, at least, is uncontested.

When the warm weather begins we get questions about "leaf spots" on tomatoes. There are at least several kinds of spots that are common, and a given plant may have more than one type. Spots are the first symptom of what can escalate into a serious problem. If you have had spots in the past, or if you're worried about getting them, we suggest you spray your plants with a copper fungicide. This works best as a preventative, rather than a curative treatment. If the spots have already appeared, the fungicide may arrest the problem, but prevention is the best course of action. The label says, "Begin treatment

2 weeks before disease normally appears..." (That would be about now.) Elsewhere on the label it says, "for organic production." I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I'm guardedly optimistic. Spray only the leaves, not the fruit. Always follow the instructions on the label.

On my home tomato plants, I expect the first ripe fruit by July 10 or so, if the weather doesn't go bad. When the plants start to flower, note the weather. If it is chilly or rainy (or both), the fruit set may be affected. This means that instead of, say, ten fruits on a cluster, you might only get four. Or, the ones that do form might not be completely pollinated, resulting in misshapen fruit. (Still edible, though.) Some people swear by a spray called "Blossom Set" to assure pollination, but I've never used it. Others like to shake their plants, just a bit, during flowering. This helps distribute pollen. You only need to shake the plants if you think the pollination process might be in danger. But I like doing





these little chores. They force you to examine the plants and watch them closely for any changes that might need to be addressed. Every morning and again in the evening I spend about 15 minutes with them---keeping an eye on things. It's a nice, peaceful way to start and to close out the day.