



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Our Big Garden & Some Unpleasant News

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Over the years, some of you may have seen our summer tomato plant production project. We sell the fruit to local restaurants and at Milaeger's Great Lakes Farmer's Market every Sunday, in season. At season's end, we stop sales so we have enough fruit for the Tomatomania taste test in early September. For years, the tomato plants were grown in pots in our "Cravo" greenhouse, in the northwest corner of our Douglas Avenue property (near the post office.) Later, we relocated the project to an "in ground" garden alongside St.

Andrew's church, on Four Mile Road. That worked out great for some years, but it was inconvenient for our crew to get over there to maintain the plants, and of course



tomato field

to pick the fruit. This year we created a new garden in the southwest corner of our property on Douglas Avenue. (It's hidden from public view---not intentionally---but we may offer a tour of the garden at some time.) It measures about 80' by 120', a little more than a fifth of an acre. We put in an irrigation system, and covered the soil with landscape fabric for weed control. Then we planted the tomato plants---over 360 of them. This year we planted later than usual---June 8th. By then the weather had warmed, so the plants grew well. I predict first fruit by July 20. That is, if the weather is normal---just don't ask me what normal weather is!

In addition to the tomatoes, we are growing a few of each kind of hot and seasoning peppers. The latter is a loosely defined category of peppers that



we created. They are varieties that are reputed to have only a small amount of heat, if any, but definitely don't fall into the "sweet" pepper class. We have noticed quite a bit of taste and heat variability in the seasoning peppers. Some of them are hotter than we were led to believe. You will be able to sample them at Tomatomania, Saturday, September 9th.



malformed tomato

Along the edge of the same garden, we are also growing, for the first time, some giant pumpkins. The only pumpkins I've grown up to now were "volunteers." That is, plants that sprouted accidentally. The local squirrels chew up the pumpkins on my porch every October, scattering seed all over the place. Many them sprouted

the following June, and produced fruit. Serendipitous gardening! We won't be putting a lot of effort into the giant pumpkin project, we're just trying to have a bit of fun.

Things aren't going so well at the home garden. Some of the tomato plants are showing symptoms that I've never experienced. A few weeks ago, the upper parts of the plants showed new growth that was distorted. Twisted and contorted stems, and malformed leaves. There was hardly any wilting or leave curl, and the leaves stayed green with no marks. After checking my tomato resources, I determined that the problem was due to herbicide drift. In other words, some sort of weed control accidentally drifted onto the plants. It wasn't enough to kill them, but they are disfigured. Since it didn't look like a disease, I decided to "wait and see" what would happen next. The problem was apparently a temporary condition, as the plants now seem to be resuming normal growth. The damaged growth is still there, and normal new growth is taking over, but the plants will be smaller than normal this year.



malformed tomato

Although I do have a few nearly ripe



malformed tomato

fruits, production has been disrupted, and output for the first part of the season will be below expectations. This is a frustrating experience, because there is apparently nothing I can do to correct the damage. I'm just going to sit tight and see what happens next. I can't imagine where the herbicide drift came from, so I guess that will remain a mystery. I have had at least one query from a customer with a problem like mine. That is what started my search for an answer. During my research for the customer, some of my own plants displayed the same, or very similar symptoms. I continue to research the disorder, and remain open to the possibility that my diagnosis may be wrong. Maybe some

of you have experienced similar problems.

As if the tomato plant disfigurement isn't enough of a headache, blossom end rot (BER) has again emerged as an issue. This condition is a black, leathery patch on the bottom (or, blossom end) of the tomato fruit. It is sometimes hard to see because it is under the fruit. Shortly after fruit set, I



try to inspect all fruit to make sure they don't have the symptom. I remove any that show signs of BER, knowing that the problem will only worsen. Better to remove the damaged fruit and force the plant into the next set of flowers. I tried to minimize the likelihood of BER by planting late, after the weather was warm, using fertilizer high in calcium, and adding calcium rich bone meal. None of these techniques were effective, or at least not effective enough. But, these sorts of problems are a normal part of gardening; it's all part of the challenge.



Bloody Butcher