



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

The Quest for the Perfect Tomato

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One tomato problem I hear a lot about is fruit cracking. After carefully tending the garden all summer, the fruit appears, swells, and finally colors up. Then, when it's ready for picking, it develops a crack. The flavor isn't affected, but your perfect fruit is now marred with an unsightly gash. It happens to me too, so I feel your pain.

Why aren't the tomatoes in grocery stores cracked? Grocery store tomatoes usually look great. Cracks or other blemishes aren't tolerated. Commercial growers who sell to grocery stores only grow tomato varieties that have thick skin; that is one of their priorities. Even more important is picking them at the right time. Grocery tomatoes are often picked at first blush, or even when completely green. Then they spend a week or more in cold storage, slowly ripening. They will arrive at the grocery store looking perfect, to say nothing of their flavor.



horizontal cracking

There are two main types of tomato cracking. Horizontal, concentric cracks, usually near the top of the fruit, are genetic. You can't prevent those. If your favorite variety shows that characteristic, you'll have to put up with the problem or switch varieties. Vertical cracks are environmental and are somewhat controllable. I most often see cracking when I have so many ripe tomatoes that I can't keep up. In other words, they stay on the vine too long.



vertical cracking

Heavy rain or excess water can cause tomatoes to crack, especially if the fruit is fully ripe. If you are expecting a prolonged rainy spell, pick the fruit that is ripe, or close to it. Better to pick them at that stage than risk cracking. Let them sit on your windowsill where you can admire them before you eat them.

Another important tip is to always pick your fruit with a clipper. (The same is true for other kinds of large fruited vegetables.) If you yank the tomato from the vine, you can easily start a small crack near the top of

the fruit, and of course that crack will grow while the tomato is waiting to be eaten. Besides, carelessly pulling the fruit off the plant can split the plant

stem, and disease can enter a wounded plant. Sometimes you will see an entire truss of cherry or plum tomatoes in grocery stores. This makes for a wonderful presentation, and it also greatly reduces cracking---the growers know that the less tugging on the fruit, the less likely the fruit will crack.

Speaking of tomatoes, we now have some potted up in the greenhouses, and we expect to pick the first fruit sometime in late April. We'll be offering the fruit at the Great Lakes Farmer's Market every Sunday, depending on supply. We sowed the seed at the end of January, and now the plants have been transplanted to their final containers; 15 gallon pots. We have a dozen or so, just for fun. These are all early varieties, so their fruit will be on the small side, but at least they are "homegrown." We've also grown some mini tomato plants for you to try. These are ready right now. They are cherry tomatoes, and the dwarf plants will only grow to about 16" tall. They have started blooming, so fruit should not be too far off. These small plants should be grown indoors in your sunniest window.



greenhouse tomatoes

If the outdoor temp gets up to 55 or so, and it's not too windy, you can put them outside for a spell. They like fresh air as much as we do. These cute little plants would make a nice gift for a gardening friend; how nice and unexpected to arrive at someone's home with a healthy tomato plant instead of the old standby bottle of wine.

Heat loving plants such as tomatoes and peppers are often planted outdoors too early. We just don't seem to have the patience to wait until after Memorial



dwarf tomato plants – ready now

Day, when the weather has warmed; the planting urge is just too strong. But with plants such as spinach and lettuce, we are fighting the heat rather than the cold. These greens can be planted around April 1st, and you can enjoy fresh greens from mid-April well into June. When the weather warms later in June, the flavor (especially of lettuce) changes for the worse. At that time you should replace those leafy vegetables with warm season crops. You can plant a fresh batch of greens in late August for fall harvest. Yes, some will say you can grow "heat tolerant" varieties, but I haven't found any to be reliable. (If you know of some, I'd like to hear

about them.) One possible method for a midsummer crop is to grow lettuce or spinach in a shady area. With a moisture retentive soil and good leaf cover, the soil (with frequent irrigation) can be kept fairly cool, and some varieties will respond well to that. Both spinach and lettuce have shallow roots, so it pays to create a soil that retains moisture. You can do that with compost. It's impossible to use too much; add some until the soil seems "just right." Do it again the next year. Irrigate your plants frequently, but not heavily. They will



grow better, and the lettuce is less likely to taste bitter.

A customer's query prompted me to sow some early seed. She asked if it was too early for lettuce and spinach. Normally I would have told her to wait, especially for the lettuce. But in this warmer-than-average year I said it might be okay for the spinach, and in another ten days okay for the lettuce. But on March 15th, a very gray 40 degree day, I put in some of each, ignoring my regular routine, and my own advice. I figure seed is fairly cheap, and I just had to plant something. You understand. Maybe I was overzealous---when I was about halfway down the first spinach row the sleet started. By the time I got to the lettuce I was trying to hurry and dumped an entire packet of seed in the area the size of a nickel. I guess we've all done that. A rather auspicious start to the planting season, but I was happy.



**lettuce – 3 weeks
after planting**