



Milaeger's

Tomato Talk 2011

Tomatoes and Squash---July Progress Report

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Tomato 'Sugary'

It is July 5 and my first tomato is ripe. It is a grape tomato called 'Sugary.' A second variety---'Blood Butcher'---will be ready in a few days. I can see even more that will be ready soon. My tomatoes start to ripen every year about this time, but this year I am a little surprised that I have



Tomato 'Bloody Butcher'

fruit this early after such a cool spring. I guess the plants have caught up despite the slow start.

All my tomato plants look good right now. There are plenty of new flowers, the first fruit set is progressing, and the rich green foliage is lush. If I were to critique them I might say there is too much foliage. This is the first year that I haven't removed the axils, or suckers, that form in the "crotch" between the main stem and the leafy side branches. Growing up, I remember hearing from many gardeners the importance of removing the axils. I have read countless authors on this subject and there doesn't seem to be any consensus on the issue. Last year I removed the axils in the early part of the season, but after the first fruit set I left them alone. Although the plants were productive, they looked a little thin. This year I have so many leaves I hope that when the fruit is ready I am able to find it. One comment that I read opined that more leaves were better because they all collect energy from the sun, and that is good for plant growth and for fruit production. That makes sense to me.



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tomato axil



removing tomato axil

This year I am growing only vine (indeterminate) tomatoes. I really don't like to use the word "vine", because tomatoes don't grow like true vines. That is, they don't twine or clasp or attach to a support. However, they will keep on growing and bearing fruit as long as the weather is good, unlike bush (determinate) types that bear fruit only over a short period. In their native land, tomato plants creep along the ground, the stem sending out new roots all along the stem, to help sustain the growing plant. Growing upright, supported, the world record is 28' 7" tall---that was for a cherry tomato growing in Alabama. But not all indeterminate varieties grow tall. Some only grow three or four feet tall, but they still benefit from support because of the weight of the fruit. There aren't very many varieties like this, but I think they would be a good choice for gardeners who don't want to deal with huge plants and the large support systems they need, yet want the benefit of fruit all season.



squash blossom - female

In my raised bed I am growing some spaghetti squash by the name of 'Orangetti.' This is a winter squash, so it has a hard shell and stores well. Summer squash, such as zucchini, must be eaten soon after picking since they don't store well. 'Orangetti' is described as having flesh that is more richly colored than the common spaghetti squash, but more importantly, it is significantly more nutritious. Squash are tropical plants so they need heat to grow properly. Although they got a slow start this year because of the cool weather, they are now starting to flower.

Sometimes I hear people say that their squash (or other cucurbits) have flowered but they have no fruit. Squash have male and female flowers, and of course you have to have both in bloom at the same time if pollination is to occur. And even if they are both flowering at the same time, you need bees to do the pollinating. I have a friend who pollinated his squash by hand. Early in the morning, he picks a newly opened male flower and rubs its inner parts on the in parts of female flowers, ensuring pollination and therefore fruit. You can easily tell the male and female flowers apart. The females have a swollen ovary behind the flower, and the males have a thin green flower stem. Once pollination occurs, the flower falls off and the ovary begins to swell, eventually turning into the full sized fruit (which in turn is filled with seeds for the next generation.) This is one of the wonders of gardening---it all happens so fast, and you can witness the miracle of nature in your own garden.



squash flower - male

Squash plants often get quite large---especially winter squash such as spaghetti squash. They are productive too, so they are heavy consumers of both fertilizer and water. Make sure you fertilizer isn't too high in nitrogen. We are trying to produce fruit, not leaves. Summer squash (those with "soft" skin) can be picked and eaten most any time during the season. In fact, most growers pick their zucchini when they are fairly small---some varieties can get to be over 24" long, but the flavor is best when picketed young. Winter squash (hard shell) such as acorn, butternut, or spaghetti, should be picked when the stem turns brown and withers. Cut the stem---if you tear it off you can damage the fruit, which can lead to spoiling.

It is about this time of year when we start hearing reports of the squash vine borer. This process is begun by a visit from a small clearwing moth---some say it looks more like a wasp than a moth. The back wings are clear, and those in the front are greenish brown. Wingspan is up to 1.5" wide. The body is mostly orange, with black stripes. This moth lays its eggs on the quash stems or in the soil, near the stems. The eggs hatch and the larvae bore their way into a stem and make themselves at home. Wilting leaves and stem is the result. "Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening" recommends a pyrethrin insect spray to kill the larvae before they enter the vine. From Bonide is a pyrethrin based product called "Tomato and Vegetable---Ready to Use---Three in One. Other control methods are covering the plants or else making a slit in the stem and removing the larvae by hand. There are other causes for wilt, however, so check the plant thoroughly before reaching a conclusion.

A final word on watering. Like tomatoes, squash do not like their leaves to be wet, especially overnight. We recommend morning watering. Also, in my own garden I irrigate from the side as much as possible, allowing the water to flow to the plant rather than dousing it from on top. This practice will reduce the likelihood of disease