



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Oh No!!!.....Freaky Tomatoes?

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After waiting what seems like forever for your first big red tomato, the happy day finally arrives. But after you pick that tomato you realize that it's disfigured, like some hideous tomato version of "Ugli fruit." (Maybe it was partially hidden by leaves so you didn't notice.) Some tomato varieties are prone to this phenomenon; it has to do with the tomato's flower, and pollination. We all know that there is no such thing as being "a little bit pregnant," but tomatoes can have partial or incomplete pollination. Tomato flowers differ by variety--- some have many more petals so it's harder for them to get fully pollinated. A shortage of



"catfaced" tomatoes

insect pollinators can also be a cause, and pollination can be interrupted by heavy rain or other environmental factors---so there are a number of possible causes. When a tomato flower is not fully pollinated, the resulting



Clockwise from upper left: Carbon, Patty's Yellow Striped Beefsteak, Pink Beauty, Orange Icicle, Wisconsin 55

fruit is disfigured---some call this phenomenon "catfacing." I'm guessing whoever came up with that term did not like cats. I've seen many tomatoes like this but none suggested a cat to me. Fortunately, catfacing is only cosmetic---the flavor of the tomato is not affected. I guess you could say they are not very pretty so you might have trouble selling them at a farmers market. If the possibility of this condition bothers you, you could try hand pollination. This is a procedure that mimics bees and other pollinators. It is usually done with a tiny paint brush. Observe

the flowers carefully---make sure they are fully open and have pollen that is "loose" before you start or you'll just be wasting your time. Then simply dab the brush from one flower to the next. It doesn't matter if the flowers are from the same plant or not.

Earlier this season I experienced an unfamiliar problem on a few of the tomato plants at my house. The new growth was yellowish or really dark green, and severely stunted. I'm still not certain what it was but one possibility is "tomato yellow leaf curl virus"---a virus that is transmitted by insects. You can



find out more about it with a simple search. Whatever disease it was, it wasn't nearly as bad as the various tomato blights that I have discussed in other blogs. In fact, my plants with this "stunting" virus seem to have eventually "grown out of it." The older, stunted growth is still on the plant, but vigorous new shoots have started and have grown up past the stunted part. Leaf color on the new growth looks normal, and so is the flowering. With the virus delay, overall plant size is smaller than it would have been, and fruit production has been affected. But I was very pleased when I spotted the new growth, and now I am just glad to have discovered a tomato disease that, for once, isn't fatal.



tomato disease

The tomato harvest has now begun in earnest, and so far this year I haven't seen any of the dreaded tomato hornworms. Last year I went the



Hornworm

entire season without a sighting. You have to check daily for that nasty but beautiful pest. They can chew up a lot of leaves and fruit in a short time, so they must be dealt with. It's easy to spot the chewed up leaves, or the black droppings the creatures leave behind.

Hornworms are about the size of

your little finger, about the same thickness as a tomato stem---and the same green color, so they can be hard to spot. (After you find your first hornworm, the next one will be easier.) But, once you get a hold of one, what do you do with it? You probably already know that if it lives it will turn into a beautiful hawk moth. Most people probably enjoy seeing those exotic looking insects. A friend of mine came up with a thoughtful solution. If you grew tomatoes the previous year, most likely some fruit fell on the ground, seed was dispersed, and now you have some unwanted tomato seedlings. My friend encourages those seedlings, and when he finds a hornworm he relocates it onto the unwanted tomato plant. Everyone is happy---especially the hornworm.



Hawk Moth

It's time to get ready for some mid-summer planting so you can have a



fall harvest of fresh greens and other vegetables. I have a few empty spots in my garden, and I'm guessing you do too. The crops that typically come to mind at this time of year can be done either from seed, or in some cases, transplants. At



one month old lettuce

Milaeger's we will be offering transplants around September 1st, so all you need to do is have the ground ready by that time. Regarding transplants, we'll have several kinds of lettuce, kale, broccoli, spinach, and Swiss chard. If you want to try something from seed you can plant beets, carrots, peas,

radishes (these are all best done directly from seed.) You can start onions

now too, from sets. Some of these plants need cooler temperatures for seed germination, so check directions before starting. Lettuce, in particular, should be cooler. (On July 2nd I planted seed of seven kinds of lettuce. Five of them germinated; the other two---zip. Pretty much what I expected. I've been harvesting the five kinds for about ten days now, as "baby greens"---one in particular is very flavorful---we'll see if it holds up.) If you plan to sow seeds, it best to wait until we are not in the middle of a heat wave. It also helps to sow the seed in the evening, when temperatures are cooler, and will continue to be cool until the next day. Try to keep the soil damp and cool during the germination period. The current weather forecast calls for cooler temperatures, so this is probably a good time to start.



our next crop of greens ready in one month