

Tomato Test and Cucumber Review



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Now that our weather is on a warming trend, and we've had some nice spring rains, the buds on my Bearded Iris plants are swelling. If you read my last blog on garden phenology, you know that when Bearded Iris (sometimes called German) bloom, you can safely plant the more cold sensitive vegetables such as cucumbers and tomatoes. So says the collective wisdom of generations of gardeners. The forecast is indeed pretty favorable, with night temperatures for the next ten days predicted to be above 50 degrees. That's good enough for me. I'll be planting a few things every day, as time permits. You will recall that, as an experiment, I planted two tomato plants in the ground on May 9th. (Earlier than I recommend.) They look pretty good. Since they were planted we've had five nights when the temperature got down to about 45 degrees. Not cold enough to kill the tomato plants, but enough to stunt them. To inexperienced gardeners this may not be immediately obvious. Get down to the plant's level and look at the color of the main plant stems. If there is any hint of purplish coloring, they're probably stunted. Maybe not severely, but enough that they may have a hard time keeping up with plants that are planted at a later, safer date.



Purplish Stem



Bright Green Stem

I completed the second phase of my little “experiment.” I planted two more tomato plants, the same variety as previously. They’re from a later crop so they are slightly younger than the first two. I planted them on May 29th, straight out of the greenhouse, with no “hardening off.” The stems of these newer plants are bright green, a reminder of how dark the stems of the earlier planting have become. We’ll know soon enough if the earlier planting has been stunted. You notice I already have big cages on the tomato plants. They won’t need any support for some weeks, but I like the big cages because now the plants know exactly what I expect of them—big, lush growth. You’ve got to set high standards.



Tomato Test



Mini Munch

In the same spirit of experimentation, I'm growing a couple of new (to us) mini cucumbers. Regular readers recall that I prefer small cucumbers because of their thin, edible skin so no peeling is required. I also like using up the cucumber all at once. It seems like when I put half of a larger cuke in the refrigerator, it often spoils by the time I remember to use it. For maybe ten years now I've favored a mini variety called 'Mini Munch.' The seed is expensive, but worth it. 'Mini Munch' is parthenocarpic. That is, it produces only female flowers so it starts bearing fruit very early. With many traditional cukes, there's a long period in the early season where the plants produce only male flowers, so they can't bear fruit. 'Mini Munch' is my go-to variety, but I like trying new ones to make sure I'm growing the best there is. Like 'Mini Munch,' each of these new varieties is parthenocarpic. 'Picolino' is a small fruited type with a very compact habit. It's often suggested for gardeners who have limited space. 'Green Light' is seedless, and that's important to many folks. It was an "All American" award winner in 2020. I'm trying one larger cuke called 'Unagi.' Not the catchiest name, but it's credentials are worthy. Best harvested at 9-10", it's a thin, spineless cuke that doesn't need to be peeled and has a small seed cavity. I don't expect much of a difference in flavor from one to the next. I'm mainly interested in fruit production and disease resistance.

Photo courtesy of territoralseed.com



Photo courtesy of johnnyseeds.com



Unagi

Picolino

It's important to pick cukes regularly so that the plant continues to bear fruit. If you leave fruit on too long, the seed inside matures and the plant thinks it's mission in life is accomplished so fruit production will slow down or stop. Cucumbers grow fast. A 1" long cuke can grow to the 4-5" picking size in two days if watered properly and weather is favorable. So be vigilant; keep picking even if you can't use them. Regular watering is critical because the bitterness that we sometimes see with cukes is due to lack of water. You should be out in the garden every day anyway, checking on things, so just make sure watering the cukes becomes part of your routine.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!

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