

Plants Look Good, Keeping Fingers Crossed



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Summer is now in full swing and hopefully all of our gardens are thriving. My home tomatoes are doing well, but I've scaled way back. I used to grow over forty kinds, each one in a fifteen- gallon pot, but now I've reduced it to a more manageable nine plants. If they produce well, I'll still be giving away lots of fruit. I like eating tomatoes but there is no way I could eat everything I produce. This spring, I talked to one customer who said when his plants are producing in mid-summer, he eats between fifteen and thirty full size tomatoes every day. Some days he eats nothing but tomatoes, with no ill effects. He looked healthy, but I have to wonder what his doctor thinks of his diet.



Tomatoes on May 28th



Tomatoes on June 29th

I planted my nine plants just before Memorial Day. There were a couple of cool nights (around 50 degrees) the first week after planting, but otherwise the weather has been ideal. I've fertilized my plants four times so far, each time with a different fertilizer. I used milorganite, tomato-tone, algoplus (a liquid) and osmocote, which is a time release fertilizer. I figure we like variety in our diets, probably plants do too. I stay away from anything that's high in nitrogen. I like the added calcium that is usually found in tomato specific fertilizers, such as tomato-tone. So far the results are great. All my plants are the vine (indeterminate) type. Most folks remove the axils (suckers) that sprout along the main stem. I do that too, but I stop doing it when the plants begin flowering. I think every gardener has developed a system that works for them, but you have to be open to learning something new. My tallest plant is about 48" tall, and all the plants have flowered and set fruit. Best of all, there is no sign of blossom end rot (BER), which usually plagues me and lots of other gardeners. BER is that black leathery patch that sometimes appears on the bottom of the fruit, usually early in the season. I like to

examine the fruit right after it forms, looking for evidence of BER. If I find it, I pick the fruit and destroy it, thereby encouraging the plant to produce more flowers and therefore more fruit. I can't think of a year when I've had zero BER.



Axil to be removed

Photo courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden



**Blossom End Rot
(BER)**

I have a few older leaves that are showing some discoloration, so I'll now start spraying with a copper fungicide. This is an organic product that slows the spread of diseases, especially early blight. After I spray the leaves, I'm careful when watering so I don't rinse off the spray. I always try to keep the leaves dry, even if there are no signs of problems. It's just a simple precaution to help avoid disease. Of course rain water soaks the entire plant, but that I can't control, so I have to live with it. I keep my plants well spaced, for air circulation.

All my plants are in tall, heavy duty cages and I check them nearly every day to make sure the growth is contained within the cage for maximum support. You don't want the stems splitting from the weight of the fruit, just as the harvest begins. It pays to invest in quality cages. Properly cared for, they'll last your entire life.

Some of you will recall that my tomatoes were a near total disaster last year. Yes, I have my share of problems just like all of you and last year I confronted a problem I was unfamiliar with. It was tomato spotted wilt virus, which is carried by a tiny insect called a thrip. Not all thrips carry the disease, but if a carrier lands on your plant (not just tomatoes), it won't take long for it to show signs of the disease, and ultimately succumb. Affected plants can still produce fruit, but I wouldn't eat them. Now that I'm familiar with the disease, I will immediately discard any infected plants as soon as I'm aware of the problem. Its painful to recount last year's tragedy.



Radish on June 5th



Inedible radishes

Radish season is nearly over. The few early red radishes that remain are now pithy and so are inedible. Fortunately, I also grew some daikon radishes that took longer to mature, and I'm now harvesting those. Daikon radishes are white and carrot shaped, about 3-4" long. There are some varieties that get much longer. I always wonder how difficult it must be to harvest a 14" long radish. It seems like they might easily break in half. It pays to grow more than one kind of radish, for a longer production season. The lettuces and

mustards that were so beautiful just a few weeks ago are also now finished. They've bolted with the warm weather, which is normal. That opens up some space for late crops, or maybe some fall crops that I could plant a little later. Fall lettuces and radishes, for example.



Alpine Radish



Australian Yellowleaf Lettuce

I enjoy strolling in my small garden several times a day. I'm always looking for something that needs a little attention, something I overlooked. That's part of the fun. Gardening is not sitting in a lawn chair, appreciating your garden. Gardening is an active verb, so you need to actually do something. It's rewarding when the harvest arrives, and you can hand a neighbor a few tomatoes, and say "Enjoy these—I grew them myself."

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

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