

# July Tomato Observations



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**This year I've been getting** more gardening questions than usual. One of the first comments was from a fellow who lives just over the border in Illinois. He sent me photos of his vegetable plants in raised beds. Everything was going great, no problems. That's the kind of message I like to get. He usually follows up with me several times during every growing season, just to chat with a fellow enthusiast. Most gardeners are like that, happy to talk about their gardens. I told him my tomato plants were better than ever this year. Huskier, for some unknown reason. I'm optimistic, but cautious. I've been checking for the dreaded blossom end rot, and on my eighteen plants I have found less than ten affected fruit. That's far less than most years. I picked and discarded them. No sense putting plant energy into something that will never be any good.



**First Tomato of the Season**



**Blossom End Rot (BER). Yuk!**

I've also heard from a couple of gardeners who were really frustrated with

their tomato plants. In both cases it sounds like there was possibly more than one problem. Leaf curl was the first issue. That's usually caused by environmental conditions, so it could be corrected over time. But in this case the plants eventually collapsed and had to be replaced. They didn't look diseased, so I suspected the problem was caused by watering. Probably too much. But the second batch also failed. These tomatoes were growing in containers, with good soil. Their neighbor had the same, or similar problem. I'm left wondering exactly what happened, and so is the gardener.

The second customer had plants that were doing well until the end of June when the leaves began to discolor, with yellow mottling. There was some minor leaf curling. Working from photographs, I attributed these symptoms to overwatering. I'd like to actually see the plants to confirm my suspicions and to look for any other irregularities, but I can't go visiting every troubled tomato plant. I recommended reducing water, and start regular fertilizing with a fertilizer that's specifically for tomatoes or vegetables. It turned out the plants were on an automatic watering system, getting watered daily. I think that's too much. I sometimes let my plants go three or four days without water, especially if the temperatures are cool or if there are successive days with no sun. Better on the lean side, I believe. Because of the yellowing leaves I recommended a copper spray. It helps retard the spread of disease, and is deemed safe for edibles. The copper spray is in case early blight develops.



**First Signs of Early Blight**



**Copper Fungicide**

My own tomatoes are all doing well. Fruit is developing later than usual.

but that happens some years. I usually see signs of early blight by now, at least on a couple plants. There are some yellow leaves, but that's typical. Just the same, I'll start a regimen of copper spray as soon as the forecast calls for a few rain free days. Seems like early blight comes nearly every year at some point, so I prefer to be ready for it.

This is the time of year when tomato hornworms show up. These huge caterpillars are an impressive site, but they have voracious appetites. They're hard to see because their color is nearly identical to that of the tomato plant stem. Size is about like my little finger, with attractive diagonal striping and a "horn" on the rear end. Hornworms usually feed on the soft new growth of the tomato plants, but they will also eat the tomato fruit. I hate to kill these creatures because they eventually turn into lovely, large moths. So my solution (suggested by a friend) is to pick the worms off the tomato plant and release them on unwanted tomato plants. If your garden space is like mine, there are "volunteer" tomato plants that have sprouted from last year's fallen, excess fruit. I let the hornworms eat as much of those as they want, protecting my harvest. Everybody's happy.

photo courtesy of Missouri  
Botanical Gardens



**Hornworm**



**Pink Berkeley Tie  
Dye**

I came upon a useful tomato tip the other day. I haven't tried it yet, but I thought I'd pass it along to you, and we can all try it and see if it works. When I harvest tomatoes, I take them in the kitchen and wash them off, then let them sit out until I use them. No refrigeration. This is when cracking often occurs, and I'm sure it irritates every gardener as much as me. I see it most often on cherry tomatoes. Turns out we're supposed to wash them with warm water. The fruits absorb cold water more readily, and it causes the tomatoes

to swell and sometimes crack. Can't wait to try this and see if it makes for a more pleasant harvest.