

Slow, but Steady Tomatoes



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August 1st, 2023

I keep hearing how this has been such a warm summer. We've had our warm spells, but I think if it were truly excessively warm I would have been picking tomatoes before now. I planted my plants on May 28th, and growth has gone on uninterrupted. No cool evenings. I reviewed my notes from years past and this is definitely late for the first fruit. But I finally picked my first large fruit a couple days ago, a variety called 'Brandywine.' There are a number of strains under this name, and this is 'Sudduth's Strain,' supposedly the original. It has "potato" leaves and the fruit has pinkish colored skin, with red flesh. Some say its the finest tomato there is. There are many opinions on that subject.



**Tomato 'Brandywine
Suddith's Strain'**



Tomato dead flower

Although all my tomato plants are healthy, there have been some challenges. The most frustrating this year is the failure to set fruit. That is, the flowers look great but pollination is somehow thwarted and the fruit never forms. This could be part of the cause of delayed production this year. Blossom failure can occur for several reasons but the most common is environmental. Tomatoes are self-pollinating, but complete pollination is accomplished with the help of insects. Some kind of extreme weather, too hot or cold, excessive wind or a rain that lasts several days are the most likely. Another possibility is some kind of spray but since I really don't use much in the way of sprays, I feel the cause was environmental, and so beyond my control. You can buy "blossom set" products, but I've never used them. I guess if the problem were persistent, I might resort to that. Anyway, there were plenty of other blooms, so much fruit is in the offing.

Speaking of pollination, you have no doubt come across some malformed tomato fruit at some point in your gardening history. This is called catfacing. Its not the result of anything you did or didn't do.

Its from incomplete or partial pollination. Tomatoes are self-pollinating, but insect pollination is a big plus. If the insect activity is disrupted because of the weather, you can end up with catfacing. The fruit tastes the same and I eat them all the time, but they are cosmetically imperfect. If you want to assist in pollination you can gently shake the plants when they're flowering. When I was a kid in our family greenhouse, that was one of my jobs.



Tomato catfacing

This is the time of year when we're sometimes attacked by the tomato hornworm. This is a green caterpillar about the size of your little finger, with diagonal stripes on its body. The green color of its body is nearly the same as the color of tomato stems, so its hard to spot, until you find your first one. Telltale evidence of its presence is the chewed up leaves of the plant. These buggers like the new, soft growth so they would be near the tops of your plants. Another sign is their frass, or feces. This is dark brown and will be scattered around where they have been feeding. They have healthy appetites and will eat lots in a short time. They will also eat the fruit itself. What to do with them? If you google around a bit you'll see that they eventually turn into beautiful, large moths. If you've been growing tomatoes for some years, you may well have some "volunteer" plants coming up. Plants you didn't plant, but they sprouted from seed that got scattered around the previous year. I pick off the hornworms and

release them on those unwanted plants. Problem solved. If by chance you see a hornworm that is covered with white eggs, you can observe another of nature's wonders. These are eggs laid by a parasitic wasp. When they hatch the young will devour the worm. Painful to watch, but part of nature.

Photo courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden



Hornworm

Photo courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden



Hornworm infected with wasp eggs

We sell lots of Roma (paste) tomatoes at Milaeger's. They're characterized by a meaty, dense flesh with few seeds and an elongated shape. There are many kinds so I thought this year I'd put a few to the test. I'm growing our most popular variety simply called 'Roma,' another called 'La Roma II,' and a relative newcomer called 'Early Resilience.' 'La Roma II' was the first to bear fruit, followed closely by 'Early Resilience.' In addition to earliness, I'll be keeping track of overall production, and of course, flavor. Lots of folks can the paste tomatoes, and they also make wonderful sauces and salsa.

My one cherry tomato plant is also late. I'm growing 'Sweet million,' a variety I haven't grown in many years. The fruit trusses are so beautiful I almost hate to pick them.



Tomato 'Sweet Million'

Many of you are aware of my fondness for the cucumber 'Mini Munch.' I've had great success with it. At Milaeger's we offer it for a limited time around mid-May as part of our Vintage Veggies program. This year I failed to secure my plants. I know, with my total access you'd think I would have no trouble, but sometimes even I come up short. Fortunately, I was able to get some of the variety 'Green Light,' another mini cuke, one we offer all season long. It rivals 'Mini Munch,' and the seed is less expensive, so the plants are too. This morning I picked for less than five minutes and found 28 cukes. I think I planted four pots (usually three seedlings per pot.) I favor the mini cukes because no skinning is required. Also, I use an entire cucumber at once. No half cucumbers in the fridge that can turn ugly. You have to pick them when they are small though, about four inches. 'Green Light' is a winner!

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

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Cucumber 'Green Light'