

VEGGIE GARDEN MYTHS

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Vegetable garden harvest is well underway. This is when I hear questions that remind me there are still a lot of myths out there in need of debunking.

These myths range from breaking over the tops of onions to spraying tomatoes with calcium, not watering in the heat of day, cross pollination beliefs, and the idea organic pesticides are completely safe.

The belief that breaking green onion tops will cause all of the plant's energy to go into enlarging the bulb is a myth. All of a plant's energy comes from photosynthesis that occurs in green leaves. Once onion tops or leaves begin to die, photosynthesis decreases or stops along with bulb growth. Breaking onion tops also creates a wound, leading to storage rots. For onions you plan to store, allow the tops to die naturally.

The idea that spraying calcium on tomato plants will stop the fruit from developing blossom end rot is a myth. It is true that the brown, leathery rot on the bottoms of tomatoes, peppers, summer squash and other fruits is due to a lack of calcium. However, it is a lack of a calcium in the fruit; not in the plant or soil.

For calcium to move efficiently into and throughout a plant, a consistent moisture supply is needed. The most common cause of blossom end rot is a lack of uniform moisture. Also know that the skin of the fruit is not able to directly absorb foliar-applied calcium, making foliar calcium sprays ineffective.

The best way to prevent blossom end rot is to maintain uniform soil moisture. In other words, avoid letting soil dry out completely between watering. To reduce moisture evaporation from soil, use a layer of mulch like dry grass clippings over the soil. Avoid damaging roots by hoeing or tilling near plants, as this reduces their ability to take up water.

There is a myth that leaves will sunburn if they have water droplets on them so watering during the heat of the day is bad. If it's hot and a plant needs water, go ahead and water to avoid moisture stress. During the heat of the day is not an efficient time to water, but it will not harm plants any more than a sudden daytime rainstorm would.

Every now and then, an odd looking fruit or two is produced in the garden. This is when gardeners might think cross pollination occurred and the odd fruit is a result. First, only plants related to one another can cross pollinate. For example, pollen from pumpkins can pollinate some types of winter squash.

When cross pollination occurs, it only affects the genetics of the seed, not the current year's fruit. The only way an odd fruit might appear is if the seed is saved and planted next year. In many cases, odd shaped or colored fruit is due to environmental conditions such as heat or drought stress, or from volunteer seed left the previous year.

There are a number of lower risk or organic pesticides on the market. Keep in mind that because something is labeled as natural or organic does not mean it is completely safe for people, pets, or beneficial insects. Always read and follow label directions for all pesticides, organic or synthetic.

For example, insecticidal soap is a safe, effective organic insecticide that has minimal negative impact on the environment and many beneficial insects. In contrast, the insecticide pyrethrum, derived from chrysanthemums, is also organic and natural, yet it can be toxic to some beneficial insects, as well as humans and animals, if not used correctly.