

Tomato Fruit Issues

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As tomatoes ripen, a few odd fruit issues arise. These include growth cracks, zippering, catfacing, yellow shoulders and blotchy ripening. All interesting names but not much fun to encounter on a tomato.

Cracks in tomatoes near the stem are growth cracks. These occur when the internal growth of the fruit is faster than the skin growth. It is most often due to wide fluctuations in soil moisture, but can be related to overfertilizing and temperature extremes.

A heavy rain or deep watering after a dry period results in rapid uptake of water by tomato plants, leading to growth cracks. To reduce cracks, provide plants with a uniform moisture supply and mulch the soil with dried grass clippings or shredded leaves.

Zippering is a narrow brown scar that extends from the blossom end of the fruit up towards the stem. It usually occurs when the anther of the tomato flower sticks to the developing fruit, causing a scar as the fruit grows. Sometimes a hole develops along the scar. There is no way to reduce zippering.

Catfacing is a highly deformed fruit. It is caused when something interferes with the flowers development and it is found on the bottom of the tomato. It may be due to cold temperatures during flowering, high nitrogen fertilization, or improper pruning. It is not very common and usually affects only large-fruited tomato varieties.

Yellow shoulder disorder causes areas of the fruit near the stem to remain hard and yellow or green. The exact cause is not known but has been associated with adverse weather conditions and soils that do not promote active plant growth.

Soil conditions that lead to yellow shoulders are low potassium, low organic matter, and high or alkaline soil pH. A basic soil test should be done to determine if any of these might be at play. Other than organic matter, do not add soil amendments without a soil test to determine what and how much is needed.

Too much potassium could reduce absorption of calcium and magnesium, leading to other issues like blossom-end rot. Too much sulfur added to lower soil pH can burn plant roots; and in most cases this needs to be done a year in advance to lower pH.

Uneven or blotchy ripening is when parts of the fruit remain yellow or orange and fail to turn red. This can be due to a number of causes such as cool temperatures below 60 degrees Fahrenheit and compacted soil or overly wet soil that restricts root function and affects fruit ripening.

Blotchy ripening may also be from yellow shoulder disorder, a viral disease or a heavy whitefly infestation. There are no controls for virus disease in tomatoes. White flies would be noticed on plants and products like insecticidal soaps can be used to reduce their numbers.

With all of these tomato fruit disorders, some varieties are more prone than others. Do a good job of record keeping and make note of varieties grown each year. If one variety has recurring issues with any of these issues, consider trying a different variety.