

Tomato Diseases to Watch For
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In the vegetable garden, be on the lookout for signs of foliar disease. Some diseases begin on lower leaves as leaf spots or brown blighted areas and symptoms progress upward.

The spread of these diseases can be slowed by pinching off and discarding infected leaves. If pesticides are used, the time to begin applications of a fungicide is at the first sign of leaf infections.

On tomatoes, two common fungal diseases are early blight and septoria leaf spot. Both begin as leaf spots on lower leaves, then work their way up the plant causing leaves to die. If many leaves die, it leads to fruit sunscald and reduced yields.

Early blight occurs during warm, humid periods and can spread rapidly. It begins as irregular, dark brown areas on leaves with concentric rings developing in the centers as spots enlarge. Dark brown, sunken lesions can form on stems and leaf petioles about 10 days after infection.

Septoria leaf spot begins as tiny black dots on leaves, enlarging to small circular spots with dark margins and grayish center. Infected leaves eventually turn yellow and die. Elongated lesions also develop on stems and leaf petioles.

Diseases can be slowed by avoiding overhead irrigation and increasing air circulation around plants with proper spacing and caging. Avoid working with tomatoes when their leaves are wet.

Mulching the soil around tomatoes and other vegetables helps reduce soil splash of pathogens onto lower leaves. During a rainstorm or irrigation, water droplets hit the soil surface, splashing water and soil onto the lowest leaves. For diseases that overwinter on old plant debris, this is a common means of infection.

Most important, plant resistant varieties and avoid planting tomatoes in the same area each year. It may be best to pull and destroy severely infected plants. During fall, use sanitation by cleaning up and destroying plant debris to help reduce overwintering fungi.

Both diseases can be reduced with fungicides labeled for use on tomatoes. For best results, applications need to begin as soon as symptoms first appear on lower leaves and applications made about every 7 to 10 days or according to label direction.

Keep in mind fungicides will not cure any infections that have already occurred. Thorough coverage of the leaf surface is needed. When a fungal spore lands on the leaf, the fungicide prevents new infection.

Tomatoes are also susceptible to bacterial diseases for which fungicides containing copper as an active ingredient need to be used. These diseases are bacterial speck and spot. Both are spread from infected plant debris during periods of humid, wet weather.

Bacterial speck appears as tiny, pinhead sized, raised black specks on tomato leaves and fruits. Bacterial spot is very similar to bacterial speck, but the leaf and fruit spots are slightly larger. On tomato fruits, bacterial spot results in slightly raised, brown, scabby lesions.

Follow the same general management recommendations for fungal diseases. If you wish to apply a pesticide, use a product that is labeled for use on tomatoes and contains copper as the active ingredient.

To be effective, the first treatment must be applied before many symptoms develop. Apply additional treatments every 10 to 14 days as long as cool, moist conditions continue. Keep in mind that if used excessively or for prolonged periods, copper may no longer control the diseases.