

Let's Talk Tomatoes!

After a walk in the garden I was excited to see several green tomatoes and lots of blooms. Some of my Heirloom tomatoes are spilling over my tomato cages already! A few of these plants have laterals or suckers which might need to be pruned off to minimize competition with the main stem so that tomato fruit can get bigger and sweeter. How do we know which type should be pruned?

There are three main types of tomatoes based on their growth habit. They are determinate, semi-determinate and indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes are relatively small, bushy and compact. Many of the earliest tomatoes are determinate types. Some examples of the determinate type are Early Girl and Super Red. On the other hand, indeterminate types are large and produce tomatoes all season long. They also produce a lot of suckers. Common examples of this type of growth habit include Big Beef and Big Boy. Semi-determinate types are in between the determinate and indeterminate types. They produce fewer suckers than indeterminate types. Common examples of semi-determinate types are Celebrity and Mountain Pride.

All tomato plants can grow perfectly without any pruning as long as they are supported with stakes or cages. If gardeners do choose to prune, there are a few guidelines. Only prune indeterminate and semi-determinate types. Be sure to check the tomato labels! With indeterminate types, leave 2 – 3 suckers at the base of the plant and remove the remaining suckers. Suckers should be removed when they are about 3 – 4 inches long. With semi-determinate types, wait until the plants are 8 – 10 inches tall. Remove all suckers below the first flower cluster, except the one immediately below the flower cluster. No pruning needs to be done with the determinate types. This information was provided by The Buckeye Yard and Garden Line.

Fact Sheet HYG-1624-92, *Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden*, which can be found on the Ohioline website, states that staked plants are usually pruned to a single or double stem and periodically tied loosely to the stake with soft twine. Pruning is accomplished by removing all the branches or “suckers” that grow from the leaf axils, leaving only the main stem or the main stem and one additional branch near the base. Unsupported and caged tomatoes may be left to branch normally. Staked and pruned tomatoes produce fewer but larger fruit than caged or unsupported plants.

Every summer the Helpline receives questions about tomatoes in the garden such as, “Why are the tomatoes on my plants splitting?” Periods of uneven watering, such as drought followed by heavy rain, can cause the skin to crack on the fruit. Water the plants regularly, and use a mulch to retain soil moisture. Harvest heirloom varieties that are prone to cracking a few days before they are mature. Another popular question is “Why do my tomatoes have brown patches?” Blossom-end rot

usually begins as a small water-soaked area at the blossom end of the fruit. This may appear while the fruit is green or during ripening. As the lesion develops, it enlarges, becomes sunken and turns black and leathery. Blossom-end rot is not caused by a parasitic organism but is a physiologic disorder associated with a low concentration of calcium in the fruit. Management strategies include the following:

1. Maintain the soil pH around 6.5
2. Use nitrate nitrogen as the fertilizer nitrogen source
3. Avoid drought stress and wide fluctuations in soil moisture by using mulches and/or irrigation. Plants generally need about one inch of moisture per week from rain or irrigation for proper growth and development.

Are your tomatoes slow to ripen? Remember that temperature plays a very important part in the ripening process. Lycopene, the pigment that gives ripe tomatoes their red color, is only produced at ambient temperatures of between 50 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. The optimum temperature for lycopene production is 68 – 77 degrees Fahrenheit. Any great deviation from these temperature ranges will mean that tomatoes won't turn red. Sometimes when it gets quite hot, tomatoes on the vine may have a yellowish orange look. If practical for the size of your operation, it might be better to pick them in the "pink" stage and let them ripen indoors in cooler temperatures. Tomatoes need warmth, no light, to ripen, so there's no need to put them in direct sunlight. Place them out of direct sunlight where the temperature is 65 to 70 F.

Now is the time to be "pro-active" and check your tomato plants for early signs of diseases! Early Blight, Late Blight, Septoria Leaf Spot, and Bacterial spot can quickly take its toll in your garden.

Don't forget to email your gardening questions to OSUE Brown County Master Gardener Volunteer, Mike Hannah, at mhannah1951@gmail.com.

I have already started to pull my favorite fresh tomato recipes. Sliced tomatoes topped with fresh mozzarella cheese, fresh Basil and drizzled with Balsamic Vinaigrette Dressing is my all-time favorite.

I found a great quote from Lewis Grizzard that says, "It's difficult to think anything but pleasant thoughts while eating a home grown tomato."

Here's hoping for a long and bountiful tomato season!

Submitted by Faye Mahaffey

Brown County Master Gardener