

Cutworms

Springtime is here after a long winter of waiting. There are blue skies and sunshine. This is time to prepare the summer backyard vegetable garden. April 15th has long been designated as the average last freeze date for the Tulsa area. It is the time when it is safe to plant warm weather plants. With weather patterns changing, it could even become sooner in the future.

A very popular warm weather backyard vegetable is the tomato. It is also popular with army cutworms that come out of dormancy about the same time. The hungry larvae come out and chew down the young tender tomato plant at its base, destroying the plant soon after transplanting. Cutworms may also damage corn, cabbage, and asparagus plants.

The first step is to identify cutworms. They are the larval stage of a moth. They lay eggs slightly under soil surface, then emerge around mid-March after lying dormant for the winter. They are solitary feeders that come above ground when they are about 1-1/2" inches long. Cutworms have chewing mouth parts and can chew a plant in half at ground level. They are slimy gray with green and yellow spots and a stripe and tend to curl up in a ball underground. For you pest detectives, arm yourself with a flashlight to search for them at night, as they do not come out during the day.

Preventative and Control Measures

Prepare the garden. Clean the garden space of weeds and old plant matter. Till the garden two weeks before planting. Rotate crops each year. Employ various preventative measures using Integrated Pest Management (IPM): biological, cultural, mechanical, and physical methods.

If cutworms are found at night with a flashlight, handpick them off and drop in a bowl of soapy water. Spray the plant with a biological product such as insecticidal soap. Build a protection around the plant stem by wrapping with foil paper or covering with cardboard, then burying the paper ends below the ground. As a last resort, use a pesticide on undamaged plants. The more common and beneficial brands are Spinosad and Thuricide (Bt). Read and follow all label directions.

Related references: OSU Fact Sheets HLA-6012, HLA-6013, HLA-6018, HLA-6027, EPP-7313, EPP-7670, and Tulsa Master Gardeners IPM

