

Common Tomato Problems in Oklahoma Gardens

Tomatoes are a popular garden crop that can grow in a small area, bear through most of the season, are easy to grow, and have many culinary uses in the home, but they can be susceptible to a number of problems. Here are a few of the most common problems and how to deal with them:

Physiological Disorders

- **Leaf curl:** This is a common problem that occurs in hot weather. The leaves curl up and may turn yellow. To prevent leaf curl, water your plants regularly and avoid hoeing around them too deeply.
- **Blossom end rot:** This is a calcium deficiency that causes a sunken brown spot on the bottom of the tomato. To prevent blossom end rot, make sure your plants are getting enough calcium. You can do this by watering on a regular basis, thus allowing the calcium from the soil to work its way into the plant's vascular system. While it is not likely, you may need to use a calcium supplement.
- **Blossom drop:** This occurs when the flowers fall off the plant before they can set fruit. It can be caused by a few things, including hot weather, cold weather, or simply not enough pollination. To prevent blossom drop, plant your tomatoes in a sunny spot and pollinate the flowers by hand by using your fingers and "flicking" the blossom.
- **Fruit cracking:** This can occur when the tomatoes grow too quickly or when they are watered too much. To prevent fruit cracking, water your plants regularly and evenly. You may also want to pick the tomatoes when they are slightly yellow/pink and let them ripen indoors.

- **Weed spray damage:** Some weed sprays (e.g., 2,4-D) can damage tomato plants. To avoid this, simply do not spray your tomatoes with weed killer.

Diseases

- **Fusarium wilt:** This is a serious disease that can kill tomato plants. It is caused by a fungus that lives in the soil. There is no cure for fusarium wilt, but you can prevent it by planting wilt-resistant varieties of tomatoes.
- **Verticillium wilt:** This is another serious disease that can kill tomato plants. It is also caused by a fungus that lives in the soil. There is no cure for verticillium wilt, but you can prevent it by planting wilt-resistant varieties of tomatoes and rotating your crops.
- **Nematodes:** These tiny worms can damage tomato roots and stunt plant growth. There is no cure for nematodes, but you can control them by planting nematode-resistant varieties of tomatoes, rotating your crops, and using soil solarization.
- **Blight:** This is a fungal disease that can cause leaves to fall off and fruit to rot. There are several different types of blight, so it is important to identify the type you are dealing with before you can treat it. Some common blight treatments include fungicides, copper sprays, and cultural controls such as crop rotation and sanitation.
- **Bacterial spot:** This is a bacterial disease that can cause small, dark spots on leaves and fruit. There is no cure for bacterial spot, but you can control it by removing infected leaves and fruit, rotating your crops, and using resistant varieties of tomatoes.

Pests

- **Wireworms and white grubs:** These soil-dwelling insects can cause severe damage to young tomato plants by feeding

on their roots. To prevent wireworms and white grubs, it is important to have good weed control and to till the soil deeply before planting. If you know that wireworms or white grubs are a problem in your area, you can also treat the soil with an insecticide before planting.

- **Cutworms:** These caterpillars cut tomato plants off at the soil line, killing them. To prevent cutworms, you can use collars around your tomato plants or plant them in raised beds. You can also hand-pick cutworms if you see them.
- **Aphids:** These small, soft-bodied insects suck sap from tomato plants, causing them to wilt and stunt. To control aphids, you can pick them off by hand, use insecticidal soap or neem oil, or wash the leaves off with a strong stream of water (both top and bottom of leaves).
- **Spider Mites:** These tiny mites can also damage tomato plants by sucking sap from them. They can be difficult to see, but you may notice webbing on the undersides of leaves. To control spider mites, you can use insecticidal soap or neem oil. You can also wash the leaves off with a strong stream of water.
- **Flea Beetles:** These small beetles can eat holes in tomato leaves, causing them to look ragged. To control flea beetles, you can plant resistant varieties of tomatoes or use insecticidal soap or neem oil.
- **Tomato Fruit Worm:** This caterpillar bores into tomato fruit, making it inedible. To control tomato fruit worms, you can pick them off by hand or use *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) - a naturally occurring organic bacteria that kills caterpillars.
- **Tomato hornworm:** This large, green caterpillar can also eat tomato fruit. To control tomato hornworm, you can pick them off by hand or use Bt.
- **Tomato pinworm:** This small, red caterpillar bores into tomato fruit, making it inedible. To control tomato pinworm, you can pick them off by hand or use Bt.

- **Colorado Potato Beetle:** These yellow and black-striped beetles can eat substantial amounts of tomato foliage. To control Colorado potato beetles, you can pick them off by hand or use insecticidal soap or neem oil.
- **Blister beetles:** These beetles can cause severe defoliation to tomato plants. To control blister beetles, you can apply insecticide to the plants on which they are feeding.
- **Thrips:** This tiny insect can damage tomato plants. They have a narrow, elongated body and are pale yellow to dark brown in color. Thrips damage leaves by rasping the tissue with their mouthparts, which leaves a "silvering" appearance. They can also damage fruit, causing it to become cloudy and unevenly ripened. Thrips damage is usually considered cosmetic, but it can be unsightly. If you see thrips on your tomato plants, you can control them with insecticidal soap or neem oil.
- **Stink Bugs:** These bugs are large, flattened insects that can also damage tomato plants. They have piercing-sucking mouthparts that they use to suck the juices out of leaves and fruit. Stink bug feeding can cause sunken pits on fruit, which is known as "catfacing." Catfaced fruit may not ripen properly and may have yellow or green halos around the damaged areas. Stink bug feeding can also open up the fruit to infection by disease-causing pathogens. If you see stink bugs on your tomato plants, you should work to control them as soon as possible using insecticidal soap, neem oil, or a pesticide specifically labeled for stink bug control.

Reducing and Controlling Tomato Problems

- Till the soil deeply before planting but resist after planting so as to not damage fragile roots
- Plant resistant-type varieties of tomatoes.
- Fertilize your plants according to the directions on the fertilizer label.

- Mulch around your plants to help retain moisture and suppress weeds.
- Water your plants regularly and evenly.
- Inspect your plants regularly (daily, if possible) for signs of pests and diseases to get ahead of a potential problem
- Act as soon as you see a problem.
- There are many kinds of insecticides. It is important to select the right insecticide for the specific pest you are trying to control.
- You can also get pesticide recommendations from your local county Extension office or garden center/nursery professional.

Through routine care and observation, you can minimize the likelihood of tomato problems. Staying aware of these kinds of problems is a key step in avoiding them.

<https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/growing-tomatoes-in-the-home-garden-2.html#common-tomato-problems>

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