

Ugly Tomatoes

by Betty Hensley

From time-tested heirlooms to the exciting new hybrids, we grow tomatoes for every fancy, including the sweet and prolific cherries, the plump beefsteaks, the vibrant early girls, and determinates perfect for canning.

Changing climate conditions are providing new challenges for tomatoes prone to splitting, as well as blossom-end rot, viruses, blight, and fungi. These diseases create multiple problems, but are not the only cause we have for 'ugly' tomatoes. Nutrient deficiencies often produce disease-like systems. The good news is that you can fix deficiencies. Here is what you need to look for and what you need to know:

Nitrogen deficiency causes stunted growth and a general yellowing of the older leaves. Apply blood meal, well composted manure, or soybean meal. Be sure to read the labels for proper application.

Phosphorus deficiency produces a purplish cast on the leaves. Young seedling tomato plants often show this but outgrow it as the soil warms and their roots grow to reach this soil-bound nutrient. Apply bone meal. Protect your lungs and respiratory passages by wearing a dust mask or respirator whenever you handle fine powders such as colloidal rock phosphate. Be sure to read the labels for proper application.

Potassium deficiency causes the older leaf margins to turn yellow and brown. Dead areas get crunchy and may fall off. Apply greensand, kelp meal, or wood ashes (being mindful that wood ashes will raise your soil pH). Be sure to read the labels for proper application.

Blossom-end rot (BER) leaves a sunken, brownish-black spot on the bottom, or blossom end of the tomato. It is caused by calcium 'displacement', which means calcium is being sent to the newer, growing tissue, rather than actually being a calcium shortage. As the plant goes from its high-growth stage to a more mature reproductive stage, BER usually disappears. Consistent watering helps to prevent blossom end rot as well. Also avoid using high-nitrogen fertilizers that encourage too much leaf growth.

When glancing through a small book called THE WEEDER'S READER, I found the cutest article called 'The Obsessed Gardener.' I only wish I had room to share all of it with you, but let's have fun with a few lines at least. Are you an obsessed gardener?

You know the virtues of hand weeding.....after dark
You know the pH of your soil.....All of your friends know the pH of your soil.
You have a charge account at the local garden center.....Your spouse buys all of your Christmas presents there.
You have dirt under your fingernails.....What fingernails?
You invest in fine gardening tools.....You keep spare tools in your car for gardening emergencies.

You value all living things, great and small..... You cheered when Bambi's mother died.

There is more, but I think you get the message.

For answers to more of your gardening concerns, contact a local Master Gardener at the University of California Cooperative Extension at 209-533-5696.

Betty Hensley is a Master Gardener and prolific vegetable gardener who writes gardening columns for several local publications.