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Blossom End Rot Spoils First Fruits

Now is the time to be on the outlook for Blossom end rot on your first tomatoes and other fruits. Blossom end rot (BER) usually shows up first as a small dark or water soaked area on the bottom of the fruit. The spot can get larger until it covers the entire bottom half of the fruit or just remain a small speck. As the area enlarges it gets darker and sinks in. Blossom end rot can be bad on tomatoes but it also affects peppers, eggplants and some melons.

Affected tomatoes may even ripen earlier. This only teases the gardener with unfulfilled promises of ripe juicy tomatoes.

Blossom end rot is caused by a calcium deficiency. Several things may lead to it. Calcium levels in the soil may be low. Since calcium moves into the plant with water, BER is worse in wet or dry years. It can also be caused by poor rooting, low pH or using too much ammonia containing fertilizer.

The main culprit is drought. It is especially important to keep plants well watered during early fruit development. Most of the calcium a tomato has enters the fruit before it is the size of a quarter. During this early development, drought will induce BER which shows up near harvest.

For these reasons, BER is better prevented than cured. Prevent it with these tips.

* Soil sample and lime to bring the pH up to 6.0. Add lime several months before planting. You can also add gypsum (calcium sulfate-1 cup per plant or one to two lb. per 100 square feet) to the soil before planting.

* Plant in soils that are well drained and tilled at least eight to twelve inches deep. Water established plants with three quarter inches of water twice a week. Mulch around plants to keep the water supply even. Do not waterlog plants or let them suffer from drought. Water plants deeply and then let them dry slightly before watering again.

* Side dress tomatoes once a month. Avoid fertilizer with a high percentage of ammonia in them-especially ammonium nitrate. Use calcium nitrate, 5-10-15 or 10-10-10. This is especially important when fruit are small and just forming. Try to wait until tomatoes are the size of a nickle before you side dress.

* Be careful when hoeing or cultivating. Damaged roots will not take up calcium well.

*Do not heavily prune tomatoes. This can make them more susceptible to BER.

Once you have BER there is not much you can do for those fruits. Use the practices listed above to help the newly forming fruits stay healthy. We often find that the first fruits are affected and later fruits are okay. The condition appears to just go away.

There are BER sprays. I do not think they work very well. I know that people say, "Well I sprayed them and the disease went away!" This seems to indicate that the sprays work. What would have happened if you had not sprayed though? The next tomatoes would probably be okay anyway.

Sprays do not work well because not much calcium goes in through the leaves and fruit. Also, calcium is not moved around in the plant well. If you want to treat affected plants with calcium, pour the solution around the roots. The plant can take it up more easily this way.

You can treat affected plants by pouring solutions of calcium chloride or the Blossom End Rot sprays around the tomato plant's roots. You can instead sprinkle a cup of gypsum around the plant and water it in.

The best way to control BER is by preventing it in your next crop. Keep BER from ruining your harvest by following these tomato tips.