TOM'S GARDEN BLOG SEPTEMBER 2023

More on tomato problems……

Fruit-Cracking

Most of us have seen this problem on our tomatoes, but fruit-cracking can happen to several other crops as well. The most common cause is heavy rainfall or excessive watering following a dry spell. The problem is that the skin of the fruit is not able to expand with the rapidly growing inner tissue. The exposed tissue is more prone to rotting and attracting insects. It is very common for a beautiful head of cabbage to split open after a summer rainstorm or even from the heat. The head of cabbage can be used if you pick it right away. Root crops such as carrots, beets and parsnips can also experience cracking. Cracking occurs more often in fruits that are reaching maturity.

A few strategies to combat cracking;

*Water your garden consistently and don't overwater.

*Use a mulch on the soil surface to retain moisture.

*Consider harvesting some tomatoes early if you know a rainstorm is forecast and ripen them indoors.

*Grow crack-resistant varieties.

Late Blight

Late blight is a fungal disease caused by *Phytophthora infestans* fungus

Late blight is the disease responsible for the Irish potato famine that began in 1845. Over one million people starved to death and many Irish immigrants came here during that period. It is caused by a fungus-like organism that mostly affects tomatoes and potatoes. The microorganism is a water mold that lives in water or soil. It can overwinter in plant debris and infected potato tubers.

This blight is easily spread through the air or water during cool, wet conditions.

While early blight symptoms are similar, late blight affects new growth near the top of the plant while early blight affects the lower leaves.

Why aren't my tomatoes ripening?

The most common reason for tomatoes not getting ripe is high temperatures. Other reasons are too much nitrogen in the soil, too many fruits on the plant, and the type of tomato you are growing.

The best temperature for ripening green tomatoes is 68 to 77 degrees. When temperatures rise over 85 degrees, the plants won't produce lycopene and carotene, the two pigments necessary for ripe tomato color.

If you have hot temperatures for an extended period of time, the ripening process will stop. After the hot temperatures go back down, ripening will resume.

Too much nitrogen can be a reason for tomatoes not getting ripe. Fertilizing too much with “Miracle Gro” will cause plants to divert energy to growing leaves and stems and not ripening fruit. Use a balanced fertilizer and only apply it 2 or 3 times during the growing season.

Too many fruits on the vine can cause tomatoes not to ripen. Pick about a fourth of them and make “fried green tomatoes.”

Sometimes you just need to have a little patience. Cherry tomatoes will ripen quickly while an heirloom tomato might take a little longer.

Do you want to pick some of those under-ripe tomatoes before the first frost and ripen them indoors? Place your harvested tomatoes in an area that stays 60 to 70 degrees. Tomatoes don’t need sun to ripen, so you can put them in a paper bag or box. You won’t be successful with all of them, but most will ripen well.

Digging and Storing Dahlias

I gave away a lot of dahlia plants this year to people in garden clubs and elsewhere, so I have received questions from first time dahlia growers about digging up and storing the tubers. There is a lot of information out there that just seems too complicated and turns a lot of first timers off.

Although my advice will make serious dahlia growers cringe, my method is simple and works for me.

Be sure and record the named varieties and size and color while they are still in bloom. The longer tubers are in the ground, there is a better chance of them keeping over the winter. You should wait till after a hard frost and the top of the plant dies back. You can wait up to 2 weeks after the frost to dig them up. Last year that hard frost didn’t occur until very late, so I cut the tops off in November and stored them. Mother Nature has no rules!

Dig the tubers up, being careful not to damage them with the shovel. Throw out any tubers that are shriveled or otherwise don’t look good. Remove as much soil as possible and let them dry in the sun. Then take a small brush and remove the remaining dry soil.

Some growers will divide their tubers at this stage before storage but I find it difficult to identify the growth points so I store the whole clump and divide them in the spring after bringing them out of storage.

I then put the tubers in a gallon zip-lock bag with cedar shavings and don’t seal the bag up. Put the bags in an open storage container and keep it in an area that doesn’t freeze over the winter and stays cool. I place mine on the basement floor next to a concrete block wall. Keep it dark.
For a more detailed look at storing dahlias, visit the American Dahlia Society website.

Elephant Ears Colocasia spp. and hybrids

This may be a tropical plant, but it is easily grown just about anywhere that conditions are favorable. Its large leaves can grow up to 3 feet or longer with colors of green, chartreuse, purple, and burgundy.

The Colocasia tuber, also known as taro, is a major food source in the world, but it must be thoroughly cooked because it is toxic if eaten raw.

This is a statement plant with tropical overtones. It grows best in a sunny spot with damp soil and grows well in a large pot. It looks good on its own or combined with trailing vines and filler plants. Fertilize every 2 weeks with a water-soluble all-purpose fertilizer. In USDA zones below 8, cut back the foliage after frost and store the corms in a cool, dry location that doesn't freeze, much like you would store a dahlia.

Alocasia Alocasia macrorrhiza and hybrids

This is known as upright elephant ear or giant taro. It is sometimes confused with Colocasia but has thicker, stiffer leaves.

Leaves can grow from 16 inches to about 5 feet long. Colors range in shades of green to burgundy with distinctive colorful veins. Sometimes they have wavy, scalloped edges. This plant also works well in containers on a patio or deck with its bold texture.

Just the opposite of Colocasia, alocasia prefers full to part shade because sun will burn the foliage. It likes warm, humid weather and well-drained soil. You can move this plant indoors in winter as it makes an excellent houseplant in a bright window.

Chile Peppers

Chile peppers originated centuries ago as small, round, berrylike fruit on wild vining plants in the Amazon rain forest between Bolivia and Brazil. Indigenous people gathered and later cultivated the peppers, and birds helped to spread the seeds. Through natural and human hybridizing, every size, shape, and color of chile that we know today came from these tiny, hot fruits. Birds are the natural disseminators of chiles. Unlike mammals, birds do not have receptors in their mouths or on their tongue to feel the burn from capsaicin. That's why we sprinkle cayenne pepper in our bird feeders to discourage squirrels. Birds can eat a lot of very hot chiles and pass the seeds intact through their digestive systems. Mammals' digestive systems crush the seed and its embryo.

Scientists believe that capsaicin evolved in chiles to keep mammals from eating them. Did we listen?