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**What’s Eating The Tomatoes?**

Tomatoes are a staple in just about every garden. Many garden problems are often due to the environment or other stressors. Disease can occur in the right conditions, and most plant diseases are fungal pathogens. Lastly, insects are often responsible for chewed-up leaves and fruit.

Tomatoes are a South American native and like the heat. They may see water stress in dry conditions. Water is also important for preventing blossom end rot. While this disorder is due to poor calcium levels in fruit cells, inconsistent watering is a big culprit. The necessary calcium needs water to transport it, but dry weather often funnels water to transpiring leaves. Providing 1-2 inches of water per week to a tomato plant is recommended. Then, mulching will allow the soil moisture to be maintained.

Fungal diseases are many. Two big hitters are verticillium and fusarium wilt. These are soilborne fungi and cause plants to turn yellow and wilt despite having ample moisture. The best way to deal with them is crop rotation of several years and planting resistant varieties. Seed packets will have codes on them to denote resistance. V = Verticillium, F = Fusarium, and any numbers next to them denote resistance to specific strains or races, such as VF1F2.

The most frustrating issue while growing tomatoes may just be the insects that eat up fruits and leaves before harvest. Hornworms are named thusly because of the short spur at the end of their body, kind of like a curled horn. They are the caterpillars of moths and are green with either white diagonal stripes or yellow chevrons along the body. Fruitworms are the same as corn earworms. They are also moth caterpillars, with a slightly paler green color and black specks along the body.

Fruitworms and hornworms will both eat tomato fruits, but hornworms also eat the leaves. Scouting requires close inspection because of their coloration. Hornworm eggs are tiny green orbs, while fruitworm eggs are white. Checking the underside of the leaves for eggs will be important. Caterpillars with white egg sacs carry parasitic, Braconid wasp eggs and should be spared. Mechanical control of the caterpillars can come in the form of hand plucking, water spraying, and destroying infested fruit. Chemical control for caterpillars can be done with BT (Bacillus thuringiensis) and spinosad sprays.

Summer can turn up the heat on pest pressure. Good luck and happy hunting!

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