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## **Protect Tomato Plants**

Rainy weather can make growing tomatoes a bit more difficult. Wet foliage increases a tomato plant's susceptibility to leaf blight infection. Heavy infection causes leaf loss which will affect the fruit quality. Unfortunately, all tomato varieties are susceptible, but there are things you can do to manage this problem.

Symptoms of tomato leaf blight often appear first on the lowermost leaves (that's because they are the oldest leaves and are likely the first to be infected). Infected leaves eventually turn yellow and fall from the plants leaving the developing tomatoes exposed to intense sunlight. These tomatoes develop greyish-white, sunburned areas making them unfit to eat.

Because leaf blight is more likely to develop on tomato leaves that remain wet for long periods, it's important to promote rapid drying of the foliage as soon as possible after rainfall. One practice that helps is to stake or cage the plants. This improves air circulation around the plants and helps with foliage drying. Another important cultural practice is to use proper plant spacing; crowded plants stifle air circulation and are an open invitation for leaf blight.

Be sure to remove and destroy infected tomato plants and cull fruits at the end of the gardening season. Infected plants and plant debris produces a ready source of fungal spores (inoculum) that will infect your tomato plants next year. In addition, after removing the crop residue in the fall, immediately till the garden to bury any remaining plant debris.

Always inspect tomato transplants when you buy them. Choose plants that are healthy, vigorously growing and free of disease symptoms. After planting it's helpful to apply clean mulch around the plants; the mulch barrier protects the plants from any possible spore-contained debris remaining in the soil. In addition, avoid using sprinklers to irrigate tomato plants, because it causes leaf wetness and helps spread disease-causing spores.

Tomato leaf blight may still be a problem even with the best cultural practices. To further reduce the chance of infection, especially when extended rainfall is likely to occur, consider using a fungicide to protect the plants. As always, whenever using pesticides be sure to follow all label directions.

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