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Controlling Blossom End-Rot

Tomatoes are the number one vegetable grown in gardens and container gardens. And this time of the year, although there are many tomato questions, the most common one is this... "The bottoms of my tomatoes are turning black! What's that all about?"

It's a very common problem on tomatoes (can also happen on peppers, squash, melons, eggplant, etc), and it's called Blossom End Rot. It can be the result of many factors, including water stress (uneven soil moisture available to the plant), plants trying to become rooted / established and yet produce new growth and fruit at the same time, high feedings of Nitrogen, and a lack of calcium in the fruit. Again, this problem usually occurs early in the season, and seems to taper off as the season progresses. It is a physical problem, not a disease, so the ripened fruits can still be eaten (slice off the black spot) if desired.

So, how do you combat Blossom End Rot right now? The first and most important step is to try and regulate your watering, so the plant is receiving good, even soil moisture at all times. Foliage gets the water first, fruit gets it second. So, increased timely watering, as well as mulching tomatoes in the garden to help retain soil moisture will help. This is the most important first step in reducing Blossom End Rot.

The next step is to actually supplement the lack of calcium in the soil. This can be achieved several ways, including adding lime or gypsum to the soil around the tomato plant, or even soaking crushed eggs shells in water and using that water to help water the tomatoes. Blossom End Rot may be more of a problem in containers, as many potting mixes do not contain calcium, or very little, and sometimes are harder to keep evenly moist. There are Blossom End Rot sprays, but really aren't recommended, as they are slow to be absorbed, and you're better off correcting the overall situation causing the problem.

Lastly, make sure you're not over feeding the plants, especially with a high nitrogen fertilizer. Excessive growth, stimulated by the high Nitrogen, increases foliage production, which increases the need for water and calcium to the leaves, and results in the lack of moisture and calcium to the fruits. Use an all purpose garden food, which is lower in N and higher in Potassium and phosphorus, as well as other needed nutrients.

This very common tomato problem typically becomes less of a problem as the season progresses. Do what we've recommended, be patient, and the Blossom end rot should go away on your future fruits. Then your tomatoes will be just right for the squirrels to take a bite out of them!

Note: Cold temperatures (soil and air) will also affect the flow of calcium to the plant and fruit. A good reason to not plant tomatoes too early in the season!