VEGETABLES

Tomato Cracking

Tomatoes often have problems with cracking caused by pressure inside the fruit that is more than the skin can handle. Cracks are usually on the upper part of the fruit and can be concentric (in concentric circles around the stem) or radial (radiating from the stem). We don’t know everything about cracking but here is what we do know.

Tomatoes have a root system that is very dense and fibrous and is quite efficient in picking up water. Unfortunately, the root system can become unbalanced with the top of the plant. Early in the season it may be small in relation to the top growth resulting in blossom-end rot during hot dry weather. Later it may be so efficient that it provides too much water when we get rain or irrigate heavily after a dry spell. This quick influx of water can cause the tomato fruit to crack. Therefore, even, consistent watering can help with cracking. Mulching will also help because it moderates moisture levels in the soil. However, you can do everything right and still have problems with cracking in some years.

We have evaluated varieties for cracking during our tomato trials at K-State. It takes several years worth of data to get a good feel for crack-resistant varieties but we have found some real differences. Some varieties crack under about any condition and others are much more resistant. The difference seems to be pliability of skin rather than thickness — the more pliable the skin the more resistance to cracking.

The old variety Jet Star has been the most crack resistant of any we have tested including the newer types. Unfortunately, Jet Star is an indeterminate variety that puts out rampant growth. Newer varieties with more controlled growth are often more attractive to gardeners. Mountain Spring, Mountain Pride, Mountain Fresh, Floralina and Sun Leaper are smaller-vined types that have shown good resistance to
Tomato Fruit Sunscald

Extreme heat and bright sunlight can sunscald tomato fruit, leaving a light yellow to white-sunken spot that resembles a blister. This most often happens to fruit that is exposed to full sun after losing foliage to disease or tomato hornworms. Remove damaged fruit to encourage more fruit set. Sunburned fruit are rarely usable. (WU)

Tomatoes with Thick, Tough Skin

Hot weather can lead to tomatoes with a thicker, tougher skin than normal. However, variety also plays a role with some varieties being more likely to produce a thick skin than others. There isn’t anything that can be done about this, of course, but hope for lower temperatures. (WU)

FRUIT

Prop Up Fruit Tree Limbs if Needed

Heavy fruit loads this season may cause limbs to break if they are not given extra support. As fruits increase in size, the additional weight on individual branches may be substantial. One-inch thick boards can be used to prop up limbs.

Here's how. Cut a "V" on the top edge of the board on which the limb will rest so that it doesn't slip off. Long limbs that are heavily loaded with fruit may need a prop in the center and another to support the outer part of the limb. A plastic belt-like material that is
about 2 inches wide may also be used. This can be tied to a heavily loaded limb, then to a large
diameter limb above for support. Where a large limb is used for support, it is good to have it supporting
limbs on opposite sides so the weight is balanced. Another solution is to wrap a tape or belt material
around the tree in a spiral to prevent limbs from bending until they break. Heavy twine may be used, but
it should be removed when the fruit is picked or soon after so it does not cut into the bark on the limb.
Check trees regularly, up to two times a week during the last month the fruit are maturing. You will find
additional limbs that need support. Tending to the heavily loaded tree limbs will reduce the number of
broken limbs and help keep a balance of the fruiting wood in your tree. (WU)

PESTS

Cicada Killer Wasps

These large (1-1/3- to 1-5/8-inch long) wasps fly slowly above the ground. Cicada killers have a black
body with yellow marks across the thorax and abdomen. Wings are reddish-orange. Although these
wasps are huge, they usually ignore people. Males may act aggressively if they are threatened, but are
unable to sting. Females can sting, but are so passive that they rarely do. Even if they do sting, the pain is
less than that of smaller wasps such as the yellow jacket or paper wasp and is similar to the sting of a
sweat bee. The cicada killer is a solitary wasp rather than a social wasp like the yellow jacket. The
female nests in burrows in the ground. These burrows are quarter-size in diameter and can go 6 inches
straight down and another 6 inches horizontally. Adults normally live 60 to 75 days from mid-July to
mid-September and feed on flower nectar and sap. The adult female seeks cicadas on the trunks and
lower limbs of trees. She stings her prey, flips it over, straddles it and carries it to her burrow. If she has
a tree to climb, she will fly with it. If not, she will drag it. She will lay one egg per cicada if the egg is left
unfertilized. Unfertilized eggs develop into males only. Fertilized eggs develop into females and are
given at least two cicadas. Cicadas are then stuffed into the female’s burrow. Each burrow normally
has three to four cells with one to two cicadas in each. However, it is possible for one burrow to have
10 to 20 cells. Eggs hatch in two to three days, and larvae begin feeding on paralyzed cicadas.

Feeding continues for four to 10 days until only the outer shell of the cicada remains. The larva
overwinters inside a silken case. Pupation occurs in the spring. There is one generation per year.

Cicada killers are not dangerous, but they can be a nuisance. If you believe control is necessary, treat
the burrows after dark to ensure the female wasps are in their nests. The males normally roost on plants
near burrow sites. They can be captured with an insect net or knocked out of the air with a tennis
racket during the day. Carbaryl (Sevin) or permethrin may be used for control. (WU)
Whiteflies

We have had reports of whitefly problems in the Wichita area. Whiteflies do not overwinter well in Kansas but can build up later in the season due to migration from more southern climes, buildup of local populations and introductions from transplants. If you wish to control them on your vegetables, try an insecticidal soap or a neem based product. These products are much more effective if used before the population builds up.

We have more options on ornamental plants including Bayer Rose & Flower Insect Killer, malathion, insecticidal soap, neem based products, pyrethrin, and Ortho Rose and Flower Insect Killer. Pay special attention to houseplants that have spent the summer outside. Check carefully for whiteflies before bringing inside for the winter. If whiteflies are present, use a product labeled for houseplants. All the products listed above but malathion are labeled for houseplant use. (WU)

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