

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post
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Tomato producer, Tim Sloop of Frank Patterson Farms, told me he had the best tomato crops in years. Warm days, cool nights along with low humidity are perfect conditions for tomato production. Home gardeners, however, are having problems with their tomato plants.

Many tomato questions posed recently are concerning curling or rolled leaves. Rolled leaves are often genetic trait of certain cultivars that often alarm home gardeners. The plants still produce edible fruit with no apparent problems other than unusual rolled leaves.

One gardener brought me leaves that he said were rolled but was actually contorted with a virus. Viruses are prevalent in tomatoes and may affect only a few plants or an entire crop. The most serious virus to cause problems is tomato spotted wilt virus. The virus is vectored by thrips, a very small insect that blows in with wind currents or over-winters on weeds or ornamentals feeding on the flower buds. Unfortunately, there is no control for viruses; removal of the infected plant is the best control.

Another person brought me what she described as rolled leaves but was actually an aphid infestation. Aphids are now actively feeding causing the leaves to roll, twist and become distorted. Application of insecticides is essential to control this insect.

Another tomato problem causing plants to be distorted appears to be herbicide drift. Many herbicides, especially those containing 2, 4-D, cause contorted leaves on a multitude of garden plants. Tomatoes and other vegetables are easily damaged with drifting herbicides. Leaves will be contorted and twisted. Even a small amount will cause blooms to abort and distort or catface tomatoes.

Another major concern now is keeping plants alive during this drought. Unfortunately, infrequent irrigation or watering causes blossom end rot. Blossom end rot is a calcium deficiency aggravated by too little or too much water. Blossom end rot is characterized by black rotten spots on the blossom end of the tomato just before ripening. These plants require even moisture during periods of drought. Drip systems or soaker hoses coupled with a layer of mulch aids in retention of even moisture. Lime is the source of calcium which needs to be added to the soil before planting.

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