

Friday's Feature

By

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Selecting disease resistant tomato plants

There is nothing like the taste of a homegrown tomato. It is one of the most popular of all home garden vegetables. But, growing them at home can be somewhat challenging.

Along the Gulf Coast, tomato plants can be damaged from a variety of insects and diseases. They can also suffer from nutritional issues and physiological disorders.

Selecting which kind of tomatoes to grow is important. Personal preferences can be considered, but they usually give way to disease-resistant varieties that yield well in our hot, humid climate.

To improve your success with growing tomatoes start by choosing disease-resistant varieties. Disease resistance is indicated in the variety description by a series of letters, V, F, N, and TSW. The V indicates resistance to verticillium wilt, F for fusarium wilt, N for root knot nematodes, and TSW for tomato spotted wilt virus.

Tomato spotted wilt virus is causing huge losses to many tomato growers. It devastated home grown tomato plants the last two years in our area. It appears that we will continue to have a lot of problems most years unless resistant cultivars are planted.

The symptoms of tomato spotted wilt virus vary, but young leaves usually turn bronze and later develop small, dark spots. The growing tips die back, and the stems of terminals may become streaked. Some plants may look one-sided or stunted overall.

Plants that get infected early usually don't develop fruit. The ones infected later may have knotty fruit. The more mature tomatoes may have light-colored ring spots, and green ones may have bumpy areas with faint, concentric rings. As these tomatoes mature, the rings get easier to see and turn red and white or red and yellow.

The bottom line is that you will not get good tomatoes from infected plants, if you get any at all.

The disease is spread by insects called thrips as they feed on the plant. It's almost impossible to prevent infection by controlling these tiny insects. They usually transmit the virus before the insecticide can kill them.

Tomato spotted wilt has many hosts. It can infect crops such as peanuts, tobacco and pepper and countless weeds, too.

As with almost any virus, the most effective way to control the virus is to use resistant varieties. A few are on the market now.

The top two resistant varieties recommended by the University of Florida are Amelia and Crista.

Amelia is a vigorous tomato with a determinate habit (bush-like growth). The fruit is firm and aromatic. It is not only resistant to tomato spotted wilt virus but is also resistant to nematodes.

Crista is a large, deep globe fruit with tall robust plants. It does best with moderate pruning and high fertility. It also has resistance to nematodes.

Not all resistant varieties are available to gardeners, though. Probably the easiest way to get resistant varieties, however, is to look for seedlings at your favorite garden center. The seedlings may not be easy to find, but look for them. If you don't find them, ask for them.

If you are unable to find transplants, some mail order companies offer seeds. Contact your local Extension Office for other recommended varieties or for more information about growing tomatoes in the home garden.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>.