

Sunblock for tomatoes?

The sun's rays are tough on our faces and arms, but we can wear sunscreen to reduce the damage to our skin. Tomatoes don't have that option. Exposed to bright sun, the fruit can heat up dramatically, reaching temperatures as much as 18 degrees warmer than the surrounding air.

Sunscald damage to your tomatoes depends on their stage of maturity and the intensity and duration of the heat. The fruit is most susceptible when it is green or when the first pink color begins to show, called the breaker state.

If the fruit's temperature exceeds 86 degrees Fahrenheit on its sunny side, the flesh remains hard and will not ripen. At this temperature, the fruit can't produce the red pigment, lycopene, but still produces the yellow pigment, carotene.

At a sizzling 104 degrees, the tomato stops producing carotene and the damaged area turns white. Damaged cells eventually collapse and the area may become sunken.

To prevent sunscald

- Maintain a healthy foliage cover.
- Keep plants well-watered and free of pests and diseases that can reduce foliage.
- Don't prune your tomato plants.
- Place them densely enough that they can benefit from mutual shade. Keeping the soil cool with plenty of water and mulch helps, too.
- If you let your plants sprawl on the ground, don't turn them to expose the underside of the fruit.

That's a common cause of sunscald.

Summer heat can also cause cracking in tomatoes. Radial cracks are most common, starting near the fruit stem, and developing down the sides of the fruit wall. Concentric cracks sometimes appear as circles around the stem end of the fruit.

Cracking is most common during hot, rainy periods when temperatures are in the 90s, particularly following long dry spells. It is most severe on fruit that is ripening in full sun and plants that have been heavily pruned.

Those heavily pruned or that have lost foliage due to insects, disease or weather will heat up and be most likely to crack.

To prevent cracking

- Fertilize plants judiciously and encourage good foliage cover.
- Mulch the soil around the plants and keep it consistently moist, using drip irrigation instead of overhead impact sprinklers.

Some tomato cultivars, such as "Beefsteak-type" tomatoes, are known for cracking, while others are more resistant. Cultivars like 'Early Girl,' 'Ultra Girl' and 'Springset' resist cracking.

Download the MSU Extension publication, "Growing Tomatoes in Montana:" <http://www.montana.edu/wwwpub/pubs/mt9217.html>



Contact: Cheryl Moore-Gough, MSU Plant Sciences and Plant Pathology, (406) 994-6523 hort@montana.edu



Tomatoes will make their own shade and help prevent sunscald if you do not prune the foliage too aggressively.

Select tomato tips

Folklore about raising tomatoes is as common as the new varieties of plants. Here is a collection of tips taken from a selection of Internet sites, some of them so wild *RM* does not take responsibility for any disasters you create by following this advice.

- Plant your tomatoes near marigolds, carrots, chives, onions or parsley — tomatoes are very chummy and like neighbors of the other species.
- Smokers, wash your hands before touching tomato plants to keep from infecting them with tobacco virus.
- Use pantyhose to tie your tomato plants to stakes.
- When you transplant, bury your plants deep, all the way up to a few top leaves. Tomatoes will develop roots all along their stems, so dig a deep hole.
- Once your plants are about three feet tall, remove the leaves from the bottom one foot of stem. These are the first leaves to develop fungus problems.