

Heirloom Tomatoes

Tomatoes have always been a popular home garden crop. Tomato plants are relatively easy to grow, productive, and their fruit can be used in a variety of ways. As a result, most people who keep a garden grow tomatoes. Many of these same gardeners have at one time or another grown heirloom tomatoes. Heirloom tomatoes are an open-pollinated, or non-hybrid, cultivar of tomato. As the popularity of organic farming and buying local produce has increased in recent years, so has the popularity of heirloom tomatoes.

There are over 600 varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Many of these varieties have been grown for 50 years or more. Some heirloom varieties you may recognize, or may have even grown, include: Arkansas Traveler, Beefsteak, Brandywine, Cherokee Purple, and Mortgage Lifter. Those who prefer heirloom varieties over the newer hybrids do so because of the unique characteristics featured in heirloom tomatoes. Heirloom varieties may have a unique size, color, or flavor that make them different from another variety of tomato. In fact, no two heirloom varieties are exactly like. However, there is one thing that most heirloom varieties tend to have in common and that is their lack of disease resistance.

Two of the most common and damaging diseases of tomatoes are fusarium wilt and verticillium wilt. Fusarium wilt and verticillium wilt are both caused by soil-borne funguses. Fusarium wilt is more prevalent in warmer wetter while verticillium wilt is more common in years such as this, when we have cooler, wetter weather. Most newer hybrid cultivars of tomatoes (such as Beefmaster, Better Boy, or Pink Girl) have tolerance or resistance to fusarium and verticillium wilt. Most heirloom varieties, which were developed decades ago, do not have this resistance.

Over the past month I have visited a number of gardens with wilted tomato plants. Most of these plants were wilted because of verticillium wilt and most of these plants were heirloom varieties. Due to high levels of verticillium wilt, most heirloom varieties did not produce like the gardener had hoped. While there is little that can be done for these plants this year, there are a couple of things that can be done to avoid these diseases next year. The first is to consider replacing your heirloom varieties with the newer hybrid cultivars that have disease tolerance and resistance. If you are determined to grow heirloom varieties but had disease problems this year, you will have to rotate your tomato plants next year. They will either have to be moved to a new location in your garden or the entire garden will have to be moved to a new area of your yard.

For more information on heirloom varieties of tomato diseases, contact your local county extension center or Travis Harper by phone (660)885-5556 or e-mail harpertw@missouri.edu.