Battling Blight on Tomatoes

Tomatoes are starting to bloom, and some gardeners may actually have tiny green tomatoes developing. Keep a look out for two of the most common foliar diseases of tomato, early blight and Septoria leaf spot. These diseases may occur anytime during the growing season, but they generally become more severe after blossom-set. Both diseases result in leaf spots which typically develop on the older leaves nearest the ground.

Early blight produces brown spots (up to ½ inch in diameter) on infected leaves. Dark, concentric rings form within the lesion, giving the spots a target-like appearance. Several lesions may coalesce, causing the leaf to turn yellow, dry up, and fall off the plant.

Septoria leaf spot first appears as small, water-soaked spots on the lower leaves. The leaf spots are smaller and more numerous than those resulting from early blight. Eventually the center portion of the lesion turns light tan or gray while the margin remains dark. Small black fruiting structures (pycnidia) of the fungus form in the center portion of the lesion. Septoria leaf spot is generally more common in Kansas gardens than early blight.

Both fungi over winter on plant debris and the spores of these fungi may be splashed or blown to tomato leaves. Disease development is favored by relatively warm temperatures, abundant rainfall and high relative humidity.

Both diseases can be controlled effectively with fungicides. Chlorothalonil is effective and has a 0 day waiting period from application to harvest. Products that contain chlorothalonil include but are not limited to Fertilome Broad Spectrum Fungicide, Ortho Garden Disease Control, GardenTech Garden Disease Control, and PBI Gordon Multipurpose Fungicide. For best results, applications should begin as soon as the symptoms first become apparent, generally, around the time of blossom set. Severely infested plants may not be able to be rescued with fungicides.

At the end of the gardening season, remove and destroy all infected tomato plants. Clean up and dispose of as much tomato plant debris as possible. Avoid planting tomatoes in the same area of the garden year after year.

Lynn Loughary is the Horticulture Agent for Wyandotte County, K-State Research and Extension. She can be reached by calling 913-299-9300, ext 104 or by email lloughar@ksu.edu