

How to Treat Blight in Potatoes and Tomatoes

Biodynamically

It doesn't seem to be a challenging year for blight and other diseases, as we have had very hot and dry weather.

Yet, with rain and more moist weather on the horizon, and cooler nights next week (down to 12–13 °C), prevention might be better than cure to keep blight in my tomatoes and potatoes at bay.

For those who are new to gardening, what is blight?

Potato and tomato blight (late blight in UK and early blight in USA) is a disease caused by a fungus-like organism that spreads rapidly in the foliage and tubers or fruit of potatoes and tomatoes in wet weather, causing collapse and decay.

If the fungal community in the soil is disturbed, blight will be passed on from year to year through spores surviving in the soil.

How can you recognize blight?

Potatoes

The initial symptom of blight on potatoes is a rapidly spreading, watery rot of the leaves, which soon collapse and shrivel, turning first yellow and then brown.

During humid conditions, a fine white fungal growth may be seen around the edge of the lesions on the underside of the leaves.

Brown areas may develop on the stems.

If allowed to spread unchecked, the disease will reach the tubers. Affected tubers have a reddish-brown decay below the skin, which is firm at first but soon develops into a soft rot as the tissues are invaded by bacteria. Early attacks of blight may not be visible on tubers, but any infected tubers will rot in store.

Tomatoes

The symptoms on tomato leaves and stems are similar to those on potatoes.

Usually, yellow and then brown patches may appear on the leaves and then affect even the green fruit, while more mature fruits will decay rapidly.

Outdoor tomatoes are at high risk of infection if the weather is suitable. The disease is less of a problem under glass, as the spores have to find their way into the glasshouse through doors and vents.

If, however, blight becomes established in a glasshouse, the high humidity inside usually leads to very rapid development of symptoms.

In a polytunnel, the risk is even higher, with the plastic cover electrostatically charging the atmosphere and suspending fungal material in the air environment. Also be aware that this is more likely towards the full Moon.

Prevention for blight

Earthing up – this provides some protection for tubers.

Harvesting early – this way, potatoes are more likely to escape infection.

Picking off leaves or leaflets when just a few are affected may slow down the progress of the disease very slightly but will not eradicate the problem.

When infection levels reach about 25 percent of leaves affected, or marks appear on stems, cut off the foliage (haulm), severing the stalks near soil level and raking up the debris. When the skin on the tubers has hardened, after about two weeks, the tubers can be dug up.

Operate a rotation to reduce the risk of infection, ideally of at least four years.

Grow your own seed potatoes or get them from Scotland or the west coast of the British Isles.

Lime the soil well before planting potatoes, particularly clay soils (400 grams/10 m²).

Biodynamic measures

Potatoes & Tomatoes

Change the bioterrain of the soil and the leaves by applying a dusting of basalt, soot or ash to the soil and leaves.

Fungal communities develop within a certain pH range (pH between 5.5–6.5 is best).

Apply the Horn Silica Preparation (501) and Horsetail decoction (508) every month, 2–3 days before the full Moon (see 26 GYOH Calendar).

Spray the above applications on tomato plants when the Moon is in a warmth or light/air constellation.

Water, cultivate and pick diseased leaves off tomato plants when the Moon is in a warmth constellation (Archer/Sagittarius; Ram/Aries; Lion/Leo).

Cultivate, water and spray the above applications on potatoes in a light/air constellation (Scales/Libra; Watercarrier/Aquarius; Twins/Gemini) and/or with the Moon in Apogee.

Pick the flowers off the potato plants so that more life forces are available to grow bigger and healthier tubers (suggestion from a weathered Irish potato grower).

By the way, when I lived in Wales, I had tomato plants in a tunnel structure with four trusses of tomatoes fully laden with fruit, while the plants were totally diseased, not just with blight but also with the tomato virus. I pampered them with the above means on a regular basis.

This approach helped them to keep growing and heal, and eventually gave me tomatoes from September to Christmas. Anything is possible if you care enough.

Good luck with the challenging summer with no rain, but with change on the wing.

Happy gardening

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