

Dilemmas of the Untidy Gardener

“Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but trashiness is nature’s way”

Darrol

Adventures with Curly Top

Last year was “The Curly Top Year” and this year was supposed to be an easy one. Thanks to a dry winter and very little London Rocket growth. Well, not in my tomato patch! Last year the row covers and leafhopper barriers did their work, but this year I planted tomatoes without them and got the old curly top virus.

However, as is often the case, tribulations in the garden lead to innovations, solutions, and occasionally delightful surprises. Last year’s heirloom Roma Tomatoes produced so well, in spite of some early fungal problems, that I decided to grow them again this year from my own seed. All went well with the seedlings and the young transplants and the blossoms set fruit right through those early hot spells. Then the Curly Top hit after the tomatoes were well formed but still green. I could see lots of promise but little sauce.

Out of my own blend of stubbornness and curiosity, I refused to pull out the infected plants and start over. My plan was to sustain the plants long enough to ripen the fruit and hope the tomatoes were not too badly affected by the virus - seemed little to risk, except for spreading the disease. In years past, I have brought Yellow Pear Tomatoes through bouts of Curly Top by cutting back the infected new growth until the plants recovered. However, they are the weeds of the tomato world. Could other, more sophisticated varieties be nurtured back to health?

While trimming the infected new growth from my Romas seemed an obvious beginning, it just didn’t feel like enough. Therefore, I took a gallon of very mature worm compost out of the storage box, added a couple cups of dry crushed breadcrumbs and a little water and let it set for a few days. The additional starch increases the fungal activity in the compost. When it was ready to use, I added a half gallon of cottonseed meal and enough water to make a slurry and watered it in under the tomato plants.

And the results? The tomatoes ripened mostly without brittleness in the fruit, made great tomato sauce and the plants started growing again. The old parts of the plant are now smothered under new growth, blossoms, green tomatoes and promises of sauce until first frost.

Waltzing with Squash Bugs

I had a theory about squash bugs and built my planting and management practices on it. That worked for a couple of years – planting late in spring and keeping the plants under row covers until July, but this year put holes in my theory and bugs in my squash. I quickly discovered that the theory is easier to kill than the infestation. Nevertheless, there is hope!

My first treatment was to remove all the egg clusters that I could find, not an easy task in a rambling patch of spiny Hopi Pumpkin. The next treatment was a meticulous dusting of diatomaceous earth. In my ungodliness, how could I not enjoy the slow irritating death inflicted by these ancient creatures on my current nemesis? However, when it rains that treatment stops working and a new killer is required. During those rainy spells I patrolled the squash patch, sprayer loaded with Insecticidal Soap – sap, they are clean and dying.

I don't expect to kill them all. There will always be some around, now that they are breeding throughout the summer, but I will continue to have squash to eat. Variety matters, and in this case it matters a lot. Hopi Pumpkins are not easy to kill. There are some dead leaves in the most infested parts of the patch, but farther out on the runners those plants continue blooming and setting fruit, oblivious to the age old battle between gardener and bug raging farther down the vine.

So, what's the moral to my trashy tale? Simply that every gardener has a style and that style has consequences. My style is a bit trashy and weedy, so curly top and squash bugs are bound to show up. Figuring out how to manage my garden with them included is just another part of the challenge and reward of gardening.

Till next time,

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