

No more leathery tomatoes!
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It will soon be time for vegetables to go in the ground. For most home gardeners, this means tomatoes, because few vegetables delight more than a vine ripened tomato! One of the most common questions we get about tomatoes involves fruit with a brown or black leathery bottom. If only the bottom of the fruit is affected and there is no sign of mold or rot, the probable cause is blossom end rot.

The good news about blossom end rot is the majority of the tomato is still good, just cut off the end. The unaffected portion of the tomato is still edible. The cause of blossom end rot is an imbalance of calcium and water in the plant. The solution is to cure the imbalance by either adding more water or providing more calcium in the soil.

If the soil is sandy, mulch and the addition of organic material to the soil will improve structure and water holding. If watering has been erratic, the addition of drip irrigation and a timer will increase the amount of water going to the plant. Check the soil by the plant for moisture. If the soil is bone dry, add more water, but not too much! Tomatoes do not like wet feet and will rot if too much water is applied.

If the soil is moist by the plants, the soil probably lacks calcium. Calcium is a nutrient that can be washed out of the top soil or removed by growing plants. To replace calcium in the soil, add gypsum in the fall. It takes time for gypsum to break down in the soil and at least six months is required before results will be noticed. Gypsum can be added at a rate of 20 pounds per 100 square feet. While it can be added now, results will not be noticed until next year.

Soil structure should be composed of at least 33 percent organic material. In California's warm Mediterranean climate, this means new organic material needs to be added every year to maintain proper soil structure. A three to four inch layer of mulch, such as compost will help the soil retain moisture and will also add nutrients into the soil as it breaks down. Mulch can be added in winter for weed control and then can be tilled into the soil two weeks before planting. Additional material can be added to the top after planting for weed control and moisture retention.

In spring, the last resort remedy is to use a foliar calcium spray. Sprays can burn the plants if applied on a bright sunny day, so apply in the morning and when using any of the sprays or amendments, read the labels and use the proper safety equipment. It's important to note that commercially, foliar sprays have had some success with tomatoes grown in greenhouses. However, they generally have not been effective in the field or garden. By far the most effective control measure for blossom-end rot is proper irrigation scheduling.

Gypsum and foliar calcium spray can be found at your local nursery or grower's supply. This year, make the first investment in your soil structure and productivity with the addition of compost. Yearly applications of compost will reduce weeds and water usage and be a cumulative investment that pays off in increasing abundance in your vegi garden!

Want a splash of color around your front door? Are there times that your perennial beds lack color and bloom? Container gardening is a great way to add new elements of interest and beauty to your garden. Join Master Gardeners on Saturday, May 12 for a free three-hour class on Container Gardening. The class starts at 9 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.