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Your Garden's Last Gasp

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GARDEN NOTES

YOUR GARDEN'S LAST GASP

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Fall-38

It's the gun lap, the checkered flag is out and the fat lady is about to sing. Gardening season is almost over. Unfortunately, there are still a few hurdles to get past.

It can be frustrating and discouraging to spend the year growing a pumpkin, squash or melon, only to watch the plant die about two weeks before the fruit is ready to harvest, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. You can almost hear it mocking you as the green fruit shrivels and fades away. It is very similar to going on a trip with a carload of children, arriving at your destination, and then finding that it has been closed for the season.

There are a couple of late-season diseases that are more common and bothersome than others, he says. Powdery mildew loves to attack pumpkins, squash, cucumbers and even some melons. This disease appears to cover the leaves with a powdery substance, which weakens the plant, reduces fruit production and leads to its demise. Powdery mildew is a fungus, and there are many different kinds. For example, the powdery mildew that attacks roses does not bother squash or apples. However, the mildew that attacks squash can also attack pumpkins, cucumbers and some melons.

Try to grow plant varieties that are resistant to mildew, although it is not always easy to find them, Goodspeed says. And, unfortunately some of the better tasting squash may not be mildew resistant. One good preventative method for powdery mildew is to keep water off the plants, especially in the evening. There are a few organic controls that can also be tried. Some gardeners spray their plants with a baking soda solution. It helps prevent the mildew, but must be re-applied every few days. Spraying with milk also seems to reduce the mildew problem.

If the organic approach doesn't work, there are some fungicides registered for powdery mildew on vegetables, he says. These need to be applied as soon as you see any problem. Once the leaves are completely covered with mildew it is too late. Be sure to read and follow all label directions.

Another end of season problem that is a lot uglier, but not as prevalent, is corn smut, Goodspeed says. "This fungus attacks all but the roots of the corn. It is a gray/black, or even somewhat off-white mass measuring four to six inches in diameter that suddenly appears on the corn. If you are wondering whether you have it or not, you probably don't. It's one of those things that "you know it when you see it."

Not a lot can be done to control corn smut, he says. The best thing to do is remove the infected plant and dispose of it. The spores are carried through the air and, if left in the garden, can cause more smut next year.

Another problem that commonly occurs this time of year is root rot, Goodspeed says. It is caused by over-watering when we forget that cooler fall weather means the plants do not need as much moisture. By summer's end, most plants have developed large, extensive root systems and can survive for several days between waterings.

A solution for this problem is to allow the soil time to dry before watering again. Root rot can cause plants to look wilted and dry. Some gardeners, seeing this condition, mistakenly water even more and aggravate the problem.

“The last problem many gardeners face at the end of the growing season is the large zucchini syndrome,” he says. “This occurs when the family starts complaining about zucchini pancakes, cereal and birthday cakes. The best way to control this dilemma is to stomp nine to ten times on the offending plant. This method also turns out to be a good stress reliever.”

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