

Newsflash: Blight Hits Tomatoes
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Often I get people calling and asking about tomatoes and leaf spots. Usually the caller will tell me they have “blight” on their tomatoes. There are three diseases that we often refer to as “blight”; late blight, early blight, and septoria leaf spot. Septoria is usually what we find, however, late and early blight can become a problem too. Septoria leaf spot is a disease caused by the fungus *Septoria lycopersici* and attacks tomatoes when the temperature and relative humidity is high for long periods of time. Free water on tomato foliage also plays an important role in the spread of infection.

Septoria appears as circular brown lesions on the leaves and stems. These spots are about 2.6 mm in diameter with a yellow halo around them and eventually the leaves will brown and wither on the vines. The spots themselves have dark brown margins and tan to gray centers and are dotted with pycnidia. Pycnidia are the spore producing fruiting bodies of this disease. The size of the spots can be misleading as small spots will coalesce with others to form what appears to be a larger spot.

Septoria is moved from plant to plant by wind, rain, and even walking among the plants while the leaves are wet. With this in mind it is important to note that irrigation of tomatoes should be by watering the soil and not over the top of the plants. If overhead irrigation is used, time the watering so that the plants can dry off as soon as possible.

What can be done once septoria is noticed in the garden? Several fungicides are available to protect the remainder of the plant. Use of a fungicide that contains chlorothalonil is recommended. Apply every 7 – 14 days as the chemical will be washed away with rain or irrigation and new foliage will not be protected. You should remove (prune) any infected leaves from the plant to reduce inoculum to reduce secondary infection and practice good sanitation at the end of the growing season. Clean up and destroy all tomato vines and perform weed control in and around the garden as solanaceous weeds are also susceptible and will harbor disease. I suggest rotation of tomatoes every year or two and to rototill your garden in the fall. Also sanitize your equipment and tomato cages.

All hope is not lost if you find septoria or other blights in your garden as these diseases are manageable. Keep an eye on the weather; if high temperatures and high humidity are in the forecast consider applying a fungicide. Keep in mind that there are other diseases of tomato that can appear to be septoria so a positive identification is important.

More information on horticultural or agricultural topics can be found by calling me at 605-394-2188 or by e-mail at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.