

Tips for fighting tomato pests

By **RENEE STUDEBAKER**
COX NEWSPAPERS

AUSTIN, Texas — Two simple truths about homegrown tomatoes: First, nothing tastes better (OK, maybe chocolate). And second, nothing makes a gardener madder than losing prize fruits to tomato-chomping bugs and thieving critters.

Which means he or she will do just about anything to protect precious plants from tomato pests: stink bugs, leaf-footed bugs, hornworms and squirrels.

I decided to check in with several gardening experts: Skip Richter, Travis County director of Texas AgriLife Extension Service; Dick Pierce, lead teacher of the Austin Permaculture Guild; and Jeff Ferris, assistant Permaculture Guild teacher and a gardening instructor at Austin Community College.

Here are some of the recommendations they e-mailed in response to my questions.

Q. For stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs, I handpick, suck them up with a hand-vacuum and sometimes spray with a weak solution of orange oil. What else works?

Richter: That's a tough one. Two bricks work well! Seriously, there is not a low-tox, natural control that I have found to be effective against these pests. I think we need to get some gardeners to experiment with stuff like the oil you mentioned (careful: not too strong or will burn plants), and perhaps some of the new plant-based oils such as in Green Light's Biogonic oils (combinations of thyme, clove and other oils) as repellency products.

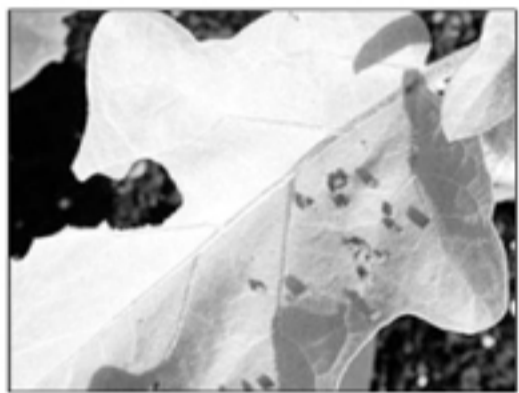
Kaolin clay may also work to repel. (However,) I have no data that shows that this would work, or if so, how often it would need to be used. Finally, some folks report success with planting things the stink bugs like better to lure them away and then controlling them on the attractant crop. Examples: sunflowers, black-eyed peas, bread poppy seed heads.

Pierce: I like your general, organic approach — also fits with permaculture; Use natural biological remedies first, such as parasitic wasps and flies that use worms as food for their eggs/larvae. Then use mechanicals — pick 'em off by hand. Then organic preparations like orange oil.

Next, let the bugs have 10 to 30 percent of your crop or tolerate a tasteless blemish. Advice for next planting is never in the same place twice. Rotate them around to far corners of your



FloridaGardener.com
Tobacco hornworms, above, can be found in all regions of Florida year-round. Damage, left, is done by the larva feeding on eggplant leaves.



News-Journal file

A squirrel feasts on a tomato snatched from a homeowner's garden.

garden so you've moved next season's crop away from this season's bugs and their larvae in the ground. For planting new tomatoes in the fall, really pay attention to 50-60 day varieties and notice that most bugs don't have a fall cycle.

Ferris: For the bugs, an organic product is Neem oil, an IGR (insect growth regulator). Keeps the insects from moving to their next stage of growth, meaning no more eggs. The nice thing about Neem is it works on stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs. As always, it's best used when you first see them. You want to gain control before they are laying

eggs. This is a product best applied a couple of times over a two-week period. You get the adults, then the hatchlings.

Q. For hornworms, I mostly just check regularly for them and handpick. Wasps and hornets snag some of them. Also birds. And occasionally I see the little white eggs on the back of a hornworm that let me know he's been visited by a parasitic fly. What am I leaving out?

Richter: That covers it. If one goes out daily or so to check plants, they won't do much damage before being discovered.



Los Angeles Times file

Clusters of tomatoes are growing on the vine. With luck — and diligence to keep out unwanted critters — you'll reap a similar harvest.

Call a neighborhood child to your place, drop a hornworm on the sidewalk and step on it and they'll think it is so cool you won't have to do any more hand-picking yourself. Think of it as "importing natural enemies of the hornworms."

Ferris: For hornworms (and other caterpillars), a good organic is Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). When eaten by the 'pillar, it causes it to stop eating and very rapidly. They then starve to death. Safe to use when used correctly, low or no impact on other good insects, and works better the younger the 'pillar is when it eats it. DO NOT use any-

where around your butterfly garden, only on your veggies, and even then, be aware you make a trade-off — you have to have caterpillars if you want butterflies.

Q. For squirrels, I've found nothing that works better than bird netting, with edges pinned down so they can't get under. What do you recommend to keep squirrels and other critters from stealing tomatoes?

Richter: Make dumplings. Seriously, I don't know any other good options. I wonder if the ScareCrow motion-activated sprinklers would work? I know

they are great for keeping cats and dogs out.

Ferris: I don't have a squirrel issue — at least not yet. Bird netting is a pain, but I guess that's a personal choice depending on how bad you want tomatoes. I would consider plastic or inflatable snakes around the tomato cages. Also, I really recommend a birdbath near the tomatoes, and you must keep it full during hot weather. Mockingbirds (and other birds) are notorious for poking holes in tomatoes. They aren't after the flesh. They're looking for moisture.

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