Get ahead of plant diseases

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, Department of Horticulture

Beyond the range of human sight, armies of fungi, bacteria, nematodes and viruses are waiting to attack our vegetable gardens. By preparing for the inevitable onslaught from the beginning, victory in the form of a vigorous garden can be yours.

There are a number of ways to stay ahead of plant diseases.

Before you plant, choose a sunny, well-drained spot with good air movement. Raised beds can improve drainage. Remove or plow under old crop debris from last year. Select disease-resistant varieties and, if purchasing transplants, check to make sure they are disease-free before you bring them home. If you are planting by seed, consider using seed that has been commercially treated with fungicide. Plant seed and transplants into warm soil to avoid stressing them and space plants properly to assure air movement between them.

Practice crop rotation by altering what is planted in the same place every few years. If you have a small garden, consider not growing some crops for a few years or grow them in containers away from the garden. That way, diseases in the soil from previous year’s crops won’t build up and infect this year’s crop.

Once you have established your garden, take the time to control the weeds. Pokeweed, Johnsongrass, milkweed, wild cucumber, nightshade, ground cherry and clovers can harbor insects and disease pathogens. Avoid plant stress by watering when needed and mulching. Avoid getting the foliage wet. Water from below or water early in the morning, so the foliage will have time to dry before the sun sets. Avoid working in the garden when leaves are wet. This will help to reduce the spread of bacterial blights.

With a little planning before you plant and monitoring throughout the growing season, you will be able to harvest a good crop of healthy vegetables.

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