Bluestem Breezes
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Slow Down Summer – Hurry Up Garden

Over the past couple of weeks, I am noticing that several items in my garden are slowing down – in production and/or in ripening/maturing. This seems to be a hot topic amongst other gardeners as well.

Here are a few examples. My okra plants are absolutely beautiful – but, with few blooms. My tomato vines are loaded with tomatoes – that are green. Peppers were plentiful enough that I sent several bags to the freezer – note the word "were". Can you relate with produce in your own garden?

The high heat conditions aren't helping my garden, or my patience. To calm our fears, we are not alone! This week, K-State Specialist Ward Upham discusses the slow ripening of tomatoes and the bitter flavor in cucumbers.

TOMATOES

The extremely hot weather we have had recently not only interferes with flower pollination, but also can affect how quickly fruit matures. The best temperature for tomato growth and fruit development is 85-90F. When temperatures exceed 100 degrees, the plant goes into survival mode and concentrates on moving water. Fruit development slows to a crawl. When temperatures moderate, even to the low to mid 90s, the fruit will ripen more quickly.

Tomato color can also be affected by heat. When temperatures rise above 95 degrees, red pigments don't form properly though the orange and yellow pigments do. This results in orange fruit. This doesn't affect the edibility of the tomato, but often gardeners want that deep red color back.

So, can we do anything to help our tomatoes ripen and have good color during extreme heat? Sure, there is. We can pick tomatoes in the "breaker" stage. Breaker stage tomatoes are those that have started to turn color. At this point, the tomato has cut itself off from the vine and nothing will be gained by keeping it on the plant. If tomatoes are picked at this stage and brought into an air-conditioned house, they will ripen more quickly and develop a good, red color. A temperature of 75-85 degrees F will work well.

CUCUMBERS

A bitter taste in cucumbers is the result of stress that can be caused by a number of factors, including heredity, moisture, temperature, soil characteristics, and disease. Most often this occurs during the hot part of the summer or later in the growing season.

Two compounds, cucurbitacins B and C, give rise to the bitter taste. Though often only the stem end is affected, at times the entire fruit is bitter. Also, most of the bitter taste is found in and just under the skin. Removing the stem end and the skin can often help salvage bitter fruit.

Bitter fruit is not the result of cucumbers cross-pollinating with squash or melons. These plants cannot cross-pollinate with one another.

Often newer varieties are less likely to become bitter than older ones. Proper cultural care is also often helpful. Make sure plants have the following:

– Well-drained soil with a pH between 6.0 and 6.5. Plenty of organic matter also helps.
– Mulch. Mulch helps conserve moisture and keeps roots cool during hot, dry weather.
– Adequate water especially during the fruiting season.
– Disease and insect control.

Don't give up on your garden! Keep up with regular watering and routine maintenance. For additional information, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.