FALL PLOWING WILL REDUCE TOMATO LEAF SPOT OR BLIGHT

Recent investigations by the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States department of agriculture, indicate that tomato leaf spot, or blight, which causes an average annual loss of approximately 250,000 tons of tomatoes in the middle Atlantic and middle western states, can be largely controlled by thoroughly plowing under all dead tomato vines in the fall to prevent the overwintering of the fungus.

The tomato leaf spot fungus, as shown by experiments, grows fruits, and overwinters on various kinds of dead plant material, such as weeds, grasses, corn stalks, wheat stubble, and remains of other crops. It overwinters in greatest abundance on old tomato vines, however, as it starts on the live plants when there is little competition with other fungi and obtains a monopoly on this material. During the autumn and spring it thoroughly permeates the surface tissues of the old tomato vines lying partly or wholly on the surface of the soil, and in the summer produces innumerable fruiting bodies and spores. This food supply usually carries it well into the fall, by which time it spreads to other dead plant remains and hence lives over another winter. By means of this saprophytic existence on dead plant debris, it is able to live from year to year until it finds a favorable opportunity to attack another tomato crop.

Covering the infected tomato vines with soil at the end of the picking season causes the death of the fungus before spring. The vines have to be thoroughly covered, however, to obtain this result, as those left partly or wholly exposed harbor the fungus. If the leaf spot fungus could be scompletely prevented from living over even one winter there would obviously be no more leaf spot. The more nearly this condition is approached, the less likelihood of an epidemic, for this fungus does not produce spores until summer and a small amount of it could hardly multiply enough under natural conditions to do much damage in the short period favorable for its distribution.

Plowing the vines thoroughly under in the fall in the preparation of the land for the succeeding crop will prevent an enormous amount of overwintering. This accompanied by clean culture and crop rotation should practically control this disease if generally practiced. The use of a rolling colter to cut the vines or of a curved rod to turn the ends into the bottom of the furrow as they are covered with soil may aid in the covering. Disking and plowing will not suffice unless all the parts are covered so deep that they will not become exposed.

The eastern practice of disking tomato fields at the end of the harvest and sowing grain or grass is apparently responsible for much overwintering of this fungus, as this enables it to live and multiply on the tomato vines until the grain stubble or dead grass leaves are available as food.

Owing to temperature limitations, leaf spot or blight does not usually appear in tomato fields in the middle Atlantic and middle western states until June 15 to July 1. The use of very early plants is therefore a means of partially escaping it. This will not apply, however, to the main or late crop. Moreover, it will not aid much if leaf spot develops in the seed bed and is carried to the field on the plants, as this produces early epidemic conditions. The necessity of a clean seed bed is therefore apparent. Horse nettle, purple thorn apple, Jimson weed, ground cherry, and black night shade should be kept out of fields, roadsides, fence rows, and other parts of the farm, as they are also hosts of this fungus.

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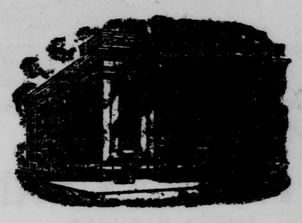

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