

Ask Dr. Vege – Why Tomatoes Crack

Here in southeastern Michigan, tomatoes are usually planted after the last frost date, around the middle of May. The first tiny tomato blossoms appear in early June followed within a week or two by the perfect little green fruits. After nearly a month of anxious anticipation, the fruits begin to ripen. But then the unthinkable happens. The tomatoes begin to crack up. This is no laughing matter! What causes this phenomenon?

Tomato cracks are generally caused by irregular watering patterns. Let's explore a few of these:

- Inconsistent watering. A dry spell followed by heavy watering causes the inside of the fruit to expand faster than the skin, causing a crack.
- Heavy rain. When the fruits experience a heavy downpour, water is absorbed too quickly and the skin splits.
- Calcium deficiency. Lower soil levels of calcium can lead to weaker skin that splits easier.
- Rapid temperature changes. These stress the plant and can make the fruits more prone to cracking.

Spring and early summer 2025 has been a weather forecast nightmare. One day the high temperature is 96 and just a few days later it is 72. Strike One. Then let's consider the torrential downpours, sometimes 1-3 inches in a single day. Strike Two. Sprinkler systems run rain or shine, so when it downpours and then the sprinklers run... Strike Three.

Types of cracks.

- Vertical. Vertical cracks go from the stem toward the bottom of the fruit. They are usually found in ripening tomatoes.
- Concentric. Concentric cracks circle around the stem. There can be multiple cracks on one fruit. These are most often found on heirloom types.



Vertical and concentric cracks

Prevention Tips

- Tomatoes, like most plants, need 1 inch of water per week, more when the temperatures spike. The challenge is to evenly spread that watering out over the whole week, maintaining consistent ground moisture.
- Mulch not only helps the soil retain moisture but also helps control soil temperatures, which can help prevent cracking.
- Side dressing with a 'vegetable garden' fertilizer can help replace calcium used up by the plants. Always follow label instructions.
- Anticipate a storm with heavy rainfall in its prediction and harvest tomatoes a bit early. They will continue to ripen on the windowsill and be less likely to split.

Tomato cracks are unsightly, but the fruits are still edible, especially when used for cooking sauces or making salsas. You may not win any State Fair ribbons, but you can still enjoy a healthy harvest. Alaine Bush