



Garden Tips & Techniques: Dealing with Cucumber Pests & Diseases

Cucumbers are one of the quintessential summer garden crops. Refreshingly crisp and juicy when the weather is hot and steamy, they are a light, replenishing snack right off the vine. They perform in the kitchen, too, useful in anything from cold salads to falafel wraps, to homemade refrigerator pickles & relish.

But more often than not, we find that our Pittsburgh-dwelling cucumber plants succumb to pests and disease. Here are some of the common pests and disease that we encounter, and what to do about them!

- *Cucumber Beetles*: Spotted or striped, these pesky insects can chew small holes in cucumber leaves or flowers. Identify them by their ¼" size, their bright yellow backs, and bold black stripes or spots. Their larvae feed on the plant's roots, but their most devastating characteristic is their tendency to carry bacterial wilt, which they spread from plant to plant.
 - **What to Do**: Hand pick the beetles in the morning or evening when they are slow-moving. Smash them if you aren't too faint of heart, or drop them in a cup of soapy water. If you've had problems in the past, seek out a type of cucumber that is resistant to bacterial wilt, like Johnny's Selected Seeds "Little Leaf" variety.
- *Bacterial Wilt*: This disease causes plants to wilt and eventually kills them. But healthy cucumber plants can wilt in the heat of the day. So how do you know if your cucumber's got the disease? Plants that have the disease don't recover in the cooler parts of the day (or night). You can also test by cutting off a wilted branch and touching your finger to the cut area. If the plant has bacterial wilt, a white substance will stick to your finger as you pull it away.
 - **What to Do**: Pull and destroy any affected plants as soon as you notice the disease, to keep it from spreading. Keep cucumber beetles under control (see above), and plant resistant varieties if possible.
- *Powdery Mildew*: This fungal disease looks like a fine white dust on the top of the cucumber leaf. It starts in little spots but can grow to encompass whole leaves.
 - **What to Do**: Planting in full sun can help keep the disease at bay. If you've had powdery mildew in your garden in the past, plant resistant varieties and try spraying preemptively once a week with a baking soda solution: 1 tbsp. baking soda to one gallon of water. You can add ½ tsp. liquid castile soap to help the solution to stick to the leaves. If your plants have powdery mildew already, try spraying with [neem oil](#), which smothers the spores of the fungi, keeping the disease from spreading. For either spray, be careful

to apply to a small area first to see how the plant responds. And don't spray drought-stressed plants or in the heat of the day.

- *Downy Mildew*: Angular yellow spots on cucumber leaves often indicate this fungal disease. The leaves eventually turn brown and "crispy." In humid conditions, a dark feathery mold may grow on the underside of affected leaves.
 - **What to Do**: The best course of action is to plant varieties that are resistant to this disease (like Marketmore 76 or Little Leaf). If your plant has the disease, pull it in order to keep the mildew from spreading to other plants in this growing season. The spores will not overwinter in this climate.
- *Slow Production*: Cucumbers need to be picked almost daily in hot weather. If you leave a few on the plant to get huge and blimp-like, the plant will slow production, determining that it has done its duty in producing fruit (and seeds). To keep the plant going, harvest regularly and completely.

A final note about cucumber production: Grow Pittsburgh's production growers often plant successions of cucumbers and squash, since they are so susceptible to disease. We just count on the first succession dying off as the second succession begins to produce.

If your cucumbers died early this year and you are grieving the full harvest you didn't have...there is still time! Order some seeds of a quick-producing variety; go for a pickling variety like "Northern Pickling," or "Vertina," which will produce in around 50 days. That puts the beginning of your cucumber harvest in late September, which gives you 3-4 weeks of production before frost. If you've got the space and the inclination, there's still time! Happy cucumber growing. Stay tuned for our favorite pickle recipes, coming next week!