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Green tomatoes in Master Gardener Bonnie Courter's garden. Extreme heat over the last few months has slowed the ripening process on tomatoes around the county.

Tomato follies

All this extra heat is delaying the ripening process tomatoes go through each year

Question: Why are my tomatoes not ripening on the vine this summer? I have been providing adequate water and fertilizer. By mid-summer I am usually sharing my tomato bounty with friends, neighbors and our local food pantry. I have heard from other home gardeners that they are experiencing the same disappointment and frustration. Why is this summer so different?

AnsWER: Sorry to hear that you are not able to enjoy your vine-ripened tomatoes yet. Rest assured, you are not the only home gardener in our growing area longing for a delicious home-grown tomato!

Due to the extreme heat we experienced earlier in July and into August, we can add tomatoes to the list of plants that have been adversely affected.

It may help to understand how tomatoes ripen. Typically,



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this process occurs in phases. During the first 40-50 days tomatoes grow to their mature size but remain green. This is when they are said to be in the mature green phase.

Normally, pigments change soon after, going from green to light green to whatever color the tomato variety is meant to be.

We may have expected the hotter than normal temperatures this summer to push this ripening process along at a faster pace, but the opposite actually happened. The optimum temperature for ripening the varieties we are

used to growing here in Douglas County is between 70-75 degrees. When temperatures rise above this and exceed 85-90 degrees during the day and stay around 75 degrees at night, the ripening process slows to a snail's pace and may even stop altogether.

Lycopene and carotene are two naturally occurring chemicals that give fruits and vegetables their pink, red, orange or yellow color. Lycopene is found in high amounts in tomatoes. This is what makes tomatoes red. When temperatures reach that critical high of 85-90 degrees, lycopene cannot be produced.

Tomatoes will remain in the mature green phase until temperatures cool back down.

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conditions. None of these will help. You just have to wait for the heat to moderate.

If you are an impatient gardener or you just can't wait for that BLT, you can pick the tomatoes in the mature green phase and bring them indoors where the temperatures are 70-75 degrees to finish ripening. It helps if there is a slight

blush of pink or red color on the fruit when you bring them inside.

Never place green tomatoes in the refrigerator since the cold temperature will prevent further ripening.

Let's hope by next summer, temperatures return to a more comfortable range for humans, animals and plants. Otherwise, we will be adding heat-resistant tomato varieties to our spring garden shopping lists – or making lots of fried green tomatoes.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.