

Coming soon to a tomato plant near you,

The Hornworm!

Meeting your first hornworm face to face, on your tomato plant, is a moment you won't forget. These worms grow up to be 4 inches in length, can get as fat as a finger, and have curved posterior horns to boot.

The first clue to a hornworm invasion usually comes with the discovery of leafless tomato plants. Not known as dainty eaters, these oversized pests cause extensive damage – fast! Fond of tomatoes and other plants in the same family, including your peppers and eggplants, hornworms don't just create a few holes as they eat. They devour entire leaves and feed on flowers and fruit. The upper part of the plant is usually hit first.

Camouflaged by their fresh-green color, tomato hornworms blend in against stems and leaves. Even when the damage is widespread, these culprits avoid detection by easily hiding on plants during the day. You would think this fat, four-inch-long caterpillar would be easy to find, but it has spent millennia learning how to resemble tomato stems and leaves. You don't know it's there until plant-chomping damage is done.

Catch hornworms in action at dusk, dawn or nighttime, when these pests come out to feed in the open. Large, black droppings left on leaves and the ground below give clues to

hornworm hangouts. They've also been known to reveal themselves if you spray leaves vigorously with a hose. Here is a fun fact! Armed with a black light at night, you can easily stalk your prey as it glows a greenish color among the tomato vines.

The adult forms of these hornworms are known regionally as sphinx moths, hawk moths or hummingbird moths. These large moths emerge in the late spring and lay their eggs at night on plant leaves. They prefer tomato, but they'll use related plants, too. Under optimal condition, a single adult female moth can produce up to 2,000 eggs. Hornworms hatch in less than one week, and then dine relentlessly on your veggies or up to one month. With a life cycle of just 30 to 50 days, two or more generations per season are common.

Eliminating Hornworm Problems

Handpicking hornworms and drowning them is an effective way to fight these pests. That is, if you can find them while your plants are still standing and you don't mind spending time in dark gardens thinking about 2,000 4-inch caterpillars.

Fortunately there are other options. Easy-to-use "nonsystemic" insecticides make it simple to treat hornworms using a targeted spray or powder. Nonsystemic means they do not penetrate vegetables or plant tissue. You can treat tomatoes and many other garden favorites right up to one day before harvest.

When used at the proper time BT (*Bacillus **thuringiensis***) is an

effective organic way to eliminate hornworms. Sunlight degrades BT after a few hours, so it's best if you apply it late in the day so it can be consumed during the nightly feedings. Repeat treatment every 7 to 10 days.