

Southern Blight

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend County Master Gardener

Q: What is Southern Blight?

This is the time of year many gardeners will be perplexed as to why their healthy vegetable plants suddenly begin to turn yellow and drop leaves and produce. Hot, wet weather is the perfect environment for Southern Blight. SB is a serious and destructive fungal infection that attacks plants at the base. This infection survives in the soil and can multiply quickly. To get rid of the fungus is nearly impossible, so prevention is key, by using good garden management.

What is Southern Blight of Pepper Plants?

Caused by *Sclerotium rolfsii*, this disease is also known as southern wilt or southern stem rot. Plants affected by southern blight include: Peppers, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, and beans. The fungus attacks plants initially on the stem, right at the soil line. One of the earliest signs of the disease is a small, brown lesion on the stem. You may later see a cottony, white growth around the stem near the ground, but symptoms also show up throughout the plant. Plants



Southern Blight - Close Up



Southern Blight - Full Plant

with southern blight have yellowing on the leaves, which will eventually turn brown. Eventually, the disease will cause the plants to wilt. The other signs of the disease are not always easy to notice, so it is typical to identify the problem only once the plants have begun wilting. At this point, the health of the plants may decline rapidly.

Preventing or Managing Southern Blight

Plant vegetables on a raised berm to ensure good drainage. Space plants to ensure air circulation. Rotate crops, plant resistant varieties. Previous crop residue should be buried deep enough to prevent its being brought back up in land preparation and cultivation. The fungi require oxygen for development. Keep fallen leaves or other organic matter from the base of the plant.

Use foliage fungicides to prevent foliage diseases. Fungicides may also be applied to the soil on certain crops. This will inhibit development of the fungus.

Additional resources:

- <https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/problems-treatments/problems-affecting-multiple-crops/southern-blight/>
- Peppers Southern Blight of Pepper Plants – Managing Peppers with Southern Blight
Peppers By: Mary Ellen Ellis Printer Friendly Version Image by University of Georgia
Plant Pathology, Bugwood.org