

COASTAL GARDENER
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Q: A few days ago I was picking some long-awaited tomatoes in my garden. To my dismay, I discovered several green tomatoes that were half-eaten, and many leaves had disappeared with only stubs of leaf stems remaining. I can find no “critter” causing the destruction. Can you help?

A: Probably the culprit has come and gone! I suspect you observed the aftermath of tomato hornworm activity. This pest is very active in late summer and fall. As the worm matures, it can get up to three inches long or longer and be one-half inch in diameter. A caterpillar this size can eat its way through a lot of plant tissue in one night. Most of the time there are only one or two worms present per tomato plant or even in the whole garden. The worm is also very well camouflaged, so it/they are hard to see. Also if they see you first, which is usually the case, they stop feeding and are perfectly still making detection even harder. Killing large worms with insecticide is difficult. I would suggest checking your tomato plants daily, usually in the early morning or in the evening near sundown. The worms tend to be most active at these times of day and at night. When you detect a worm, cut it in half with your garden clipper or cut off the stem on which it is, place it in a plastic bag and put it in the trash. Your tomato plants can also be sprayed with a Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) product, which will be most effective against young tomato hornworms.

Q: The leaves on my lantana have developed ugly, gray-brown, circular blotches of dead tissue. What causes this injury? The leaf tissue in the spot is paper thin, and there is often black residue in the spot.

A: What you describe is the feeding damage of the lantana leafblotch miner. The adult leafminer is a small fly (one eighth inch long), which lays its eggs into the leaf. The maggot hatches inside the leaf and proceeds to eat the leaf tissues between the upper and lower epidermis, thus the name “miner.” Usually damage is not severe enough to warrant control. However, should you wish to attempt control, spray your lantana with an insecticide containing imidacloprid as soon as you see leafminer activity (development of blotches) beginning.

Send your landscape and garden questions to: **Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**