

Gardening Questions and Answers

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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Tomatoes are the most commonly grown vegetable (or fruit) in the home garden. Whether you consider the tomato to be a vegetable or a fruit depends on who you ask.

Q: In last week's gardening column, you had a photo of a tree branch stub that was rotting. The trunk of my oak has rotted out near the base of the tree. Can such an extensive trunk rot really be the result of a small branch that rotted out several feet above the ground?

A: Yes, a rotting tree stub (from an improperly

pruned tree branch) certainly can cause extensive rotting in the interior of a tree's trunk. Stub cutting occurs when branches are pruned too far from the stem, leaving a short branch stub.

The branch tissue typically dies, delaying or preventing the formation of woundwood. This causes the wound to remain open,

leaving a tree trunk susceptible to entry from canker fungi and decay organisms. The stub protruding from the stem delays wound closure and allows the decay process to proceed for many more years. The rot occurs very slowly and may take 2 or 3 decades (or longer) before the center of a tree trunk



is rotted out. Decay can result in structurally weakened tree trunks and can shorten the life of a tree.

The starting point for wood decay in living trees is a wound. Tree wounds occur from a variety of factors, including limb breakage from high winds, a lawn mower nicking the bark of a trunk, a line-trimmer, a pruning saw, etc. The injured tissue is not repaired and does not heal like the human body. Trees do not heal; they seal.

If you inspect an old tree wound, you will notice that it does not "heal" from the inside out, but eventually the tree covers the wounded area by forming specialized "callus" tissue around the edges of the wound. After wounding, new wood growing around the wound forms a protective boundary preventing the infection or decay from spreading into the new tissue. Thus, the tree responds to the injury by "compartmentalizing" or isolating the older, injured tissue with the gradual growth of new, healthy tissue.

Wood decay usually appears in large mature trees and can be difficult to manage. It is important to have the tree examined by a certified arborist. Hazardous trees should be trimmed, cabled, braced or removed. Have a qualified expert assess the tree and recommend appropriate treatment. For information on locating certified arborists that serve this area, contact Galveston County Extension Office.

Q: Should tomatoes be classified as

a fruit or a vegetable?

A: I have to provide some additional context to the above question. Ginger Benson, my Administrative Assistant, asked me that question last Friday afternoon as she was preparing the sale catalogue for our upcoming Spring Plant Sale to be conducted on Saturday, February 15, at Galveston County Fairground in Hitchcock. Her question was in regard to whether tomatoes should be listed in the fruit section or the vegetable section of the plant sale catalogue.

Her question was a valid one as tomatoes suffer an identity confusion. Some folks refer to the tomato as a vegetable and some are steadfast in its designation as a fruit. So, who's right?

The answer depends on who you ask. If you talk to a botanist or a horticulturist, they'll maintain that the tomato is technically a fruit because it develops from the flower's ovary (yes, tomato flowers have ovaries) after flowering and holds the seeds. A vegetable is anything eaten from other parts of a plant such as roots, leaves and stems. By those two standards, seedy outgrowths such as apples, squash and, yes, tomatoes are all fruits, while roots (such as beets and turnips), tubers (such as potato), bulbs (such as onion), leaves (such as spinach, kale and lettuce), and stems (such as celery and asparagus) are all vegetables.

The fruit versus vegetable debate reached such a fever pitch many,

many years ago that the United States Supreme Court made a ruling on this important matter. In 1893, in the Supreme Court case *Nix. v. Hedden*, the court unanimously ruled that imported tomatoes should be taxed as a vegetable rather than as a fruit which would be taxed at a lower rate. The court acknowledged that a tomato is a botanical fruit, but went with what they called the "ordinary" definitions of fruit and vegetable — the ones used in the kitchen. It's impressive that the Supreme Court ruled unanimously on this case as many of today's court decisions tend to be more narrowly split decisions.

Even state legislatures have not shied away from joining the debate on vegetables and fruits. You can be relieved and proud that the State of Texas got it botanically right when the state legislature proclaimed the sweet onion as the state vegetable. The state fruit of Tennessee and Ohio is the tomato. The Arkansas legislature took a straddle-the-fence approach on this debate and named the South Arkansas Vine Ripe Pink Tomato as its state fruit as well as its state vegetable.

So, what section in the catalogue listing of tomato varieties to be offered at next month's Spring Plant Sale should you go to find tomatoes? It will be under the vegetable section.

