

Squash Flowers fail to open

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Q: My squash plants flower, but the flowers are not opening fully and fall off without developing squash. Can you tell me what is happening to my plants?

A: There could be a couple of reasons why you are not getting fruit. And they are both related to the pollination process that allows squash to produce. A single squash plant has both male and female flowers blossoms. The male blossoms are small and on a slender stalk. The female blossoms are generally larger and have visible fruit below the blossom.

A common problem in squash and pumpkins is that flowers appear early in the season but fruits fail to set, but that's because usually the early flowers are males. Until the female flowers develop, somewhat later, pollination can't occur, and the small fruit will abort. However In hybrid varieties of summer squash, the first flowers are usually females; but they too will fail to develop if male squash flowers aren't present. Squash flower pollen is heavy and sticky, so it requires bees or other insects to transfer it from male to female flowers. Wind won't suffice. Lacking insect pollinators, you can become the pollinator for squashes and pumpkins. Using a soft brush, Q-tip or a feather, gently brush the yellow pollen from freshly opened male flowers (the ones with the long stem) on to the female flowers (with a short stem and miniature fruit at the base of flower). Do this early in morning while the blossoms are open. Blossoms are only viable for one day. The trick is to be able to differentiate between male and female flowers.

But given that it is later in the season and we have had a very hot summer, the most likely reason is that with our prolonged hot weather the pollen may not be viable, this would also explain the flower not opening fully. Under very warm or damp conditions, the entire set up for squash pollination can fail because of the premature death of pollen grains or slow growth of pollen tubes. The situation can be further aggravated if you are watering overhead because moisture-loving bacteria and fungi like to grow on the failing flower and shriveling fruit.

To confirm this diagnosis look your plants over carefully. Make sure there are some male flowers among the females, because some hybrid varieties produce almost all female flowers. Also check that you have buzzing bees early in the day when temperatures are cooler. If both types of flowers are present and you have pollinators buzzing around, then as temperatures dip down into the 90's you should start to see baby squash forming.

Also, it is important to pick the shriveled flowers off the plants and compost as they can cause fungi or bacteria to grow that may further hinder squash production.