

Welcome to the Ask-a-Master Gardener column where we feature readers' common questions about home horticulture.

Q. I have beautiful zucchini and squash plants with big flowers and healthy leaves, but I don't get the vegetables you would expect from these near perfect plants. I live in Johnson City close to downtown in the Tree Streets. What gives? -Julia in JC

A. Julia, this sounds like your vine vegetables are not being pollinated. With a garden in the tree streets, there may be fewer bees and other pollinator insects to get them going. I found this information on the University of New Hampshire website:

“There are a number of reasons your zucchini plants may not be producing much fruit. To start, it's important to understand that zucchini and other squash plants are monoecious, meaning they produce separate male and female flowers on the same plant. While these flowers may look very similar at first glance, there are some distinct differences once you take a closer look. The most obvious differences are the small immature fruits at the bases of female flowers and the long thin stems of male flowers (pictured above). Early in the growing season, squash plants tend to produce more male than female flowers. While you may have tons of flowers, in order to produce fruit, you must have both male and female flowers at the same time.

Bees and other pollinators are usually responsible for transferring pollen from the male flowers to the female flowers, which ultimately leads to fruit development. If there are few bees in your garden, you'll likely have poor pollination and fruit set. Bees are sometimes few and far between in urban areas. If you think this is the case in your own garden, you can try playing the role of a bee yourself by hand pollinating the flowers. The pollen of squash plants is very sticky and is formed in the center of the male flowers. You can try using a small paint brush to move some of the pollen from the male flower to the stigma of the female flower. If that sounds too tedious, you can also just remove the male flower and gently roll its pollen onto the stigma of the female flower. It's best to try hand-pollination early in the morning as squash flowers open early and only last for one day. Also keep in mind that squashes can only be fertilized by their same species. A zucchini cannot be pollinated by a winter squash and vice versa.” – from Zucchini Plants Flowering but not Producing Fruit | UNH Extension

I've also heard you can use a cotton swab to pollinate them. I'm going to check my own watermelons and see if they have gotten pollinated this year.

Thank you for submitting this question. – your friendly Master Gardener

Please submit your questions to the Master Gardeners on their website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that aren't answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

Did you ever dream of becoming a Master Gardener yourself? You can do it! We have a training class starting August 5th at the UT-TSU Sullivan County Extension office. For more information call their office at 423-574-1919, email abelche4@utk.wsu or visit the extension website at www.netmga.net.

Did you know that UT Extension offers over 1,000 publications on Residential and Consumer Horticulture? You can browse for publications, books, videos, and other educational materials developed by subject-matter specialists to assist people across Tennessee – and best of all, almost every resource is free to access. Visit

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The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with their counties to expand the educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.