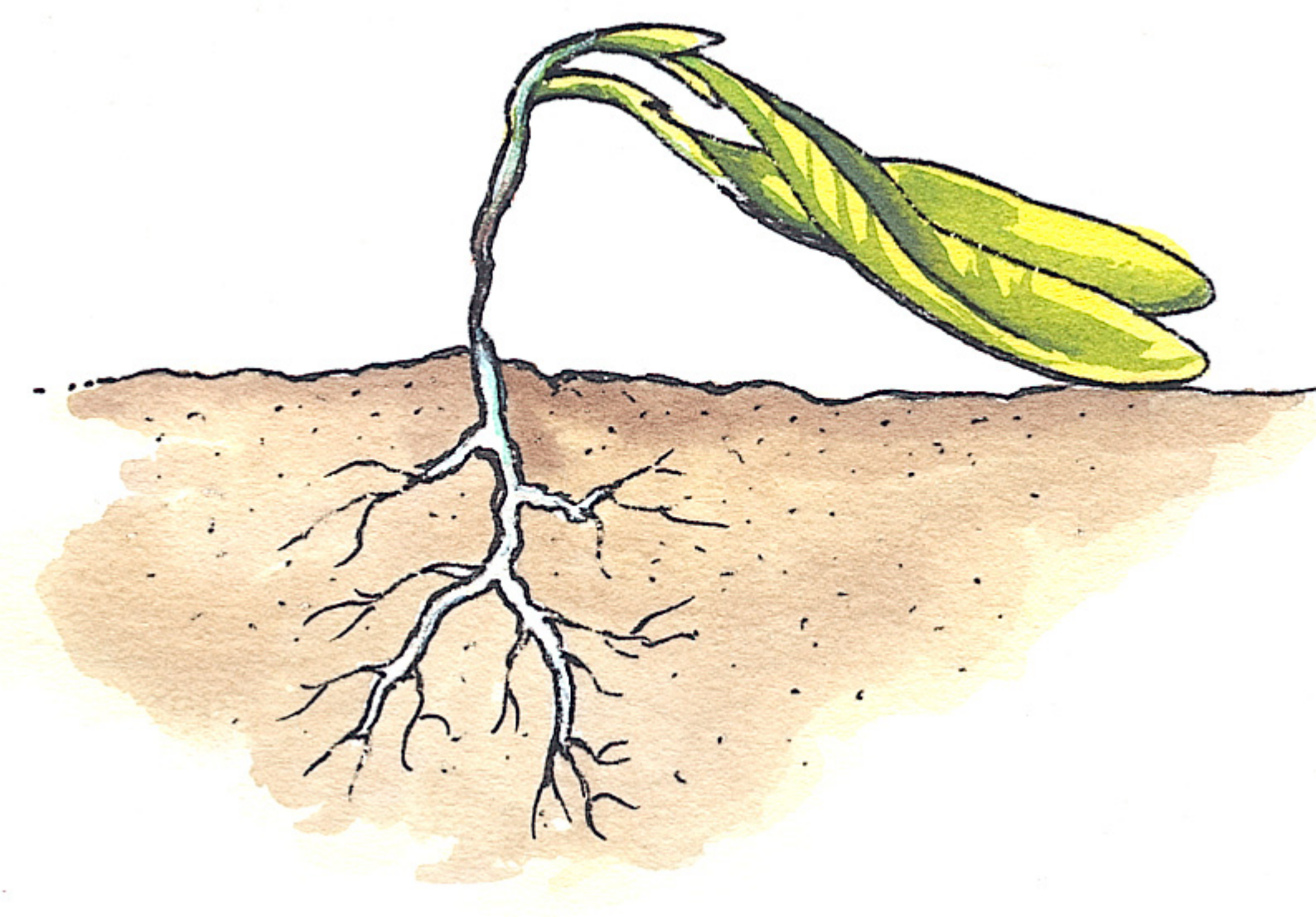

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Answer::

Unfortunately, your seedlings are probably done for. If you take a close look at the base of the damaged seedlings, you'll discover what caused the problem: Damping-off If the base of the seedlings look dark, sunken, and/or soft and rotted, the problem is damping-off, a fungal disease. Control: For seedlings indoors, to prevent damping-off, disinfect pots with a 10 percent bleach solution (1 part bleach, 9 parts water). Also, use pasteurized seed-starting mix, water seedlings from the bottom, and run a small fan continuously to circulate air. Spray seedlings with compost tea once the first true leaves emerge. If the problem is out in the garden, you'll want to take a different approach, since eliminating the fungus that causes damping-off isn't practical, and healthy soil contains loads of microorganisms that help control it. Improve soil drainage by working compost into the soil, check the soil temperature before you sow, and don't sow too early, when the soil is still too cool. Also, don't sow the seeds too deeply, because the longer the germinating seedlings are underground, the more susceptible they are. To be sure air can circulate, don't sow seeds too thickly. Finally, water plants in the morning so they dry out by nightfall, and try to keep the soil evenly moist but not sopping wet. Cutworms These chubby, 1"/2.5 cm-long brown or gray caterpillars live in the soil. Cutworms chew through the base of seedlings and transplants and also can eat them entirely. Controls: When transplanting, slip a cutworm collar over each seedling as you plant it. To make cutworm collars, cut 2"-3"/5-7.6 cm-long sections of cardboard tubing (toilet paper or paper-towel tubes are perfect). Push the collars into the soil around each plant; they'll provide protection until the plant is large enough that it's no longer of interest to the cutworms. Another cutworm control is to mix bran cereal with Btk (Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki) and spread it around all the transplants. Or spread parasitic nematodes a week before transplanting. These are available from companies specializing in organic controls. Reprinted from The Veggie Gardener's Answer Book Copyright 2008 by Barbara W. Ellis, with permission from Storey Publishing. Image credit: Publications International, Ltd.

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