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SLUGGING IT OUT WITH SLUGS

Our wet spring and summer seasons have brought out an over-abundance of slugs. Slugs love cool, wet weather. Drought or dry conditions will decrease their numbers. These ugly, soft-bodied, slimy creatures love to chomp on our young seedlings, hostas and other flowers, and even fruit and vegetables. They are eating machines and can consume over their weight in plant material each day. Thousands of rasping teeth make the star of “Jaws” look harmless in comparison. Slug damage can be identified on plants, because the resulting

holes are irregular in shape. Also look for a slime trail. (Note that deer, rabbits, nematodes, earwigs, and leaf eating beetles or caterpillars might be eating your plant leaves. Hail can damage leaves.) Some slug damage is minor and perhaps can be ignored, but extensive damage can weaken or kill the plant.

I raced snails for a hobby. One day, to make them faster, I removed their shells. All I got was a bunch of sluggish snails.

Slugs are related to clams and oysters, and can be considered snails without shells. Minnesota snails range from ¼ inch to about 2 inches in length; I have seen Alaskan snails that are 10 inches long. Slugs are not a “he” or “she”. They are more of an “it” with both male and female organs. Eggs are laid throughout the summer.

Now, how do we get rid of these pests?

Next year, start with a good garden cleanup in the spring. Remove plant debris that might contain overwintering slug eggs or provide later shelter for adult slugs. Remove boards and flat objects that slugs love to hide under during the heat of the day. Thick wood chip mulch can provide shelter for adult slugs. It is recommended that mulches be no deeper than 3 inches, a depth which will discourage weeds and maintain moisture, but will not favor slugs. If re-using pots be sure to clean them thoroughly.

Water sparingly. Drip irrigation or watering early in the day will prevent the excess moisture that slugs love. Prune off low hanging leaves to remove hiding places. Stake plants when needed. Thinning and dividing plants will result in healthier plants, better air circulation and less disease, and less favorable conditions for slugs.

Shade plants such as *Astilbe*, *Dicentra*, *Lobelia*, and *Vinca* are not attractive to slugs. Hostas with thicker and stiffer leaves (described as “rugose” or “with heavy substance”) will resist the attacks of slugs. Try ‘Blue Angel’, ‘Great Expectations’, ‘Frances Williams’, ‘Halcyon’, ‘Inniswood’, ‘June’, ‘Krossa regal’, ‘Love Pat’, or ‘Sum and Substance’.

Slugs can be trapped. Put out wet newspaper or boards in the evening, and remove the hiding slugs in the morning. They can be dropped in soapy water, 5-10% ammonia solution, or vinegar (“Pickled Slugs” anyone?). Slugs can also be crushed, or sprayed with the ammonia solution or salty water. If the trapping is continued, and enough traps are set out, slug numbers can be greatly reduced.

Beer traps are effective. Extensive studies at the University of Colorado have shown that slugs (at least those in Colorado) prefer Budweiser. However, horticulturist Jeff Gillman says that darker beers are better. Slugs are attracted to the yeasty smell, will crawl to the container of fluid, fall in, and drown. The solution does not need to be alcoholic, even a non-alcoholic beer or a mixture of yeast, sugar, and water will do. Buy a commercial trap, or make your own. Sink a jar into the ground at soil level, with the fluid level an inch or two below the edge (you want the slugs to fall in and drown, not just sip and run around drunk in your garden). A loose cover will keep the rain off and will extend the life of your beer trap.

Copper metal reacts with chemicals in the slug’s body, and copper strips will repel slugs when placed around plants. The strips are sold in garden stores. The sharp edges may be dangerous to small pets or young children.

Diatomaceous earth is the fossilized silicon skeletons of microscopic sea shells. The sharp edges of the tiny shells will cut the skin of slugs. It works well when it is dry, stops working when it is moist, and may have to be renewed often. Logically, crushed egg shells with their sharp edges should work well, but slugs have been shown to crawl across such a barrier with no problem at all.

Ground beetles, chickens, birds, snakes, toads, and turtles find slugs to be tasty. Minimize your use of garden chemicals to encourage such creatures to dine on your slugs. Encourage birds to visit and stay; install birdhouses and a bird bath.

Chemical controls include iron compounds and metaldehyde in food-based bait form. The cereal smell of the iron compounds is very attractive to dogs, and although the packages are currently labeled as “pet safe”, dog deaths have occurred. Young children may also be at risk. Copper sprays are available to apply to plant leaves to repel slugs. Chemical controls may have to be reapplied after rain. As with all garden compounds, read the entire label thoroughly, and carefully follow directions.

Happy Gardening,

