Slugging it Out

By Dawn Pettinelli, UCONN Home & Garden Education Center

This has definitely been a banner year for slugs – at least in my garden! My hosta leaves are full of holes, several dahlias only have stems left and I have been finding these slimy little creatures in many of my container plantings. I could tolerate a little nibbling here and there, but these guys have voracious appetites. Every time I plant a row of lettuce or chard, the seedlings germinate only to become slug forage shortly afterwards. There are several strategies for control and by the end of this growing season I will have probably tried them all.

Slugs are not insects but mollusks, coming from the same family as oysters and clams. Most are grayish or brownish in color ranging from ½ to 3 inches in length. Their soft bodies are covered with a slimy substance. Slugs secrete this characteristic slime or mucus to help them glide along. Since they are primarily night feeders, often the only evidence that slugs have been feeding on your plants is a 'slime trail' of dried mucus.

Slugs require moisture to survive and are most troublesome in wet areas and damp weather. Generally, they pose the greatest problem during the cooler, wetter spring and fall seasons going dormant with the arrival of hot, dry summer weather. This past month has been wet, cool and cloudy, so the slugs are thriving. During the spring, slugs lay eggs in moist areas. Some species may lay up to 100 eggs, but most average about 20 to 30. The young slugs mature over the summer and most species will overwinter as adults.

Young and succulent plants are a delicacy to slugs much to the dismay of us gardeners. They are not particularly choosy about their menu and can create havoc in perennial, vegetable and annual beds. Foliage damage by slugs is evidenced by torn or shredded leaves often with large portions missing.

How does one control these obnoxious, slimy creatures? The first step is to eliminate their hiding places and breeding sites. Remove any debris such as old boards or logs, weed or brush piles, or any other garden trash that serves as refuge sites. Keep mulch layers only an inch or two thick to allow more sun and air penetration at ground level. Groom plants and get rid of spent flowers and yellowing leaves.

Slugs can be controlled by either non-toxic or chemical means, or a combination of the two. Commercially prepared slug bait can be purchased at most garden centers or hardware stores. It contains a toxic compound called metaldehyde and usually comes in a granular form. The area to be treated should be watered first since moisture attracts slugs and then scatter the bait as directed. The colored granules are often attractive to children, pets and wildlife and should be used with extreme caution. One option is to place the bait in commercially available traps or under an upside-down flowerpot. Clean up and remove any dead slugs to protect birds and other wildlife from potential poisoning.

Slugs feeding on a head of cabbage. Photo by dmp, 2021.

Another alternative is the use of a product called Deadline™. It contains the same active ingredient but also a repellent which makes it unattractive to animals. Deadline™ is also a darker color to blend with the soil and comes in a squeeze bottle. Small dots or lines are squeezed out around each plant or groups of plants to be protected. It is also rain resistant and one application will often take care of your slug problem. As with all pesticides, check the label for use on edible plantings.

Less toxic options are commercially available products that contains iron phosphate. They are reported to be safe around pets and wildlife. Apparently, when slugs ingest the iron phosphate, even in very small amounts, it will cause the slugs to cease feeding and therefore, they will die. These products are listed for use in the vegetable garden.

Several non-chemical means of slug control may also be used. Hand-picking, although not for the squeamish, usually does a good job reducing the population. Lay down several small boards near affected plants to provide a good hiding place for slugs during the day. Simply go out during the day and collect the slugs tossing them into a can of soapy water to drown. Grapefruit halves are also handy collection receptacles. The slugs will feed on them and you can hand pick the little buggers off or toss the grapefruit when it is full.

Diatomaceous earth (not the swimming pool type) can be sprinkled on and around your plants. This substance which feels like talcum powder is actually the bodies of crushed fossilized animals called diatoms. Supposedly, it cuts into the soft bodied slugs, eventually dehydrating them. Slugs are also reportedly discouraged by placing crushed builder's sand, eggshells, wood ashes, limestone, coffee grounds or seaweed around plants but I have heard mixed reports.

Slugs are attracted to the yeast in beer so many gardeners have placed shallow dishes filled with beer (alcohol-free is fine) to lure slugs to their death. Empty these traps every few days and refill as needed. Small strips of copper can also be place around flowerpots or raised beds or individual plants. Apparently, the copper gives the slugs a slight electrical shock and they will not cross it.

If you have slug questions or queries on other gardening topics feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit our web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension office.