



It's A Slugfest!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

This damp and cloudy weather may not be favored by summer vacationers, but the slugs sure love it. They've been devouring my bean seedlings, young coleus plants and new dahlia shoots. Slugs are not picky eaters and will create ragged holes in leaves. Tender young seedlings can also be consumed with feeding on stems and fruits not uncommon.

Slugs are members of the mollusk family; they resemble snails but without the shell. They come in various earthtone shades with some even being yellow or purplish. Depending on the species, slugs range in size from a half inch to several inches. They produce slime and use it to move. Often in the morning, thin, silvery, dried slime trails can be seen as slugs feed predominantly at night. During warm, sunny days they find a cool, shady spot to hide.

All slugs lay eggs but how long it takes from egg to adult varies by species. Typically slugs overwinter as eggs but during mild winters, some adults and near adults may survive. The young slugs emerge from eggs as spring temperatures warm and begin feeding. After developing into adults, more eggs are laid in late summer and fall, and the cycle repeats itself.



Slugs feeding on cabbage leaves. Photo by dmp.

Key to controlling slugs is an understanding of their habits. It often makes sense to try and thwart them using more than one tactic. They thrive when it is cool and moist, and they are sheltered from the sun and drying winds. When it is hot and sunny out, they seek shelter. One way to

lessen slug damage is to remove any spots they could hide in. Remove any pile of plant debris, pieces of wood, weedy patches or other hiding places. This suggestion sets up a dilemma for many of us gardeners who like to mulch to hold down weeds and hold in moisture. Slugs may also find mulched areas great hiding places.

We can use slugs' attraction to dark, moist hiding spots to set up traps for them. Putting down pieces of boards or even grapefruit or melon halves (after consuming the fruit) will attract slugs. One would check these every morning and dispatch any slugs found. Placing them in a container of soapy water works. Most likely you have heard of using beer (or yeast) to trap slugs. Shallow dishes, like aluminum pie plates, are sunk into the ground near susceptible crops and filled with regular or alcohol-free beer. These should also be checked on a regular basis and cleaned and replenished as necessary.

Since slugs avoid crawling over anything dry or scratchy, one can try surrounding susceptible plants or plantings with granular limestone, coarse sawdust, gravel, wood ashes or diatomaceous earth. Keep in mind that both limestone and wood ashes will raise the soil pH which may not be desirable. Also, some of these substances may need to be reapplied after rains.

For raised beds, one can place copper barrier tape or flashing material on the outside of the beds about 1 inch from the top. The copper strip should be about 2 inches wide. Apparently the copper gives the slugs a slight shock and they will not cross it.

A last option is baits. While baits made with metaldehyde are readily available and work well to control slugs, they are also very toxic to pets and wildlife as well. A better option would be iron phosphate baits, which still can harm pets, but much larger quantities would have to be ingested. The bait pellets can be scattered around the plants you are trying to protect. Avoid getting them on plant leaves.

Slugs do have a number of natural enemies with toads being number one. They are also a food source for snakes, salamanders, turtles, several species of birds and shrews. Learn how to make your yard more friendly to wildlife to encourage natural predation.

For more information on controlling slugs or for other gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.