

Controlling the Slugs



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The banana slug is named for its resemblance to a ripe (or overripe, in the case of spotted individuals) banana and is the largest land slug in North America, growing up to 8 inches long.

Question: What can be done to control slugs in my garden?

AnsWER: Slugs, from the phylum Mollusca, sub-group Gastropoda, can be very destructive in the garden, feasting on hostas, day lilies, primroses, and a host of other vegetable plants as well.

They have a head, a ventral muscular foot and a shell (which is internal in the case of slugs). You can spot their destruction by the slimy, mucous trail they leave behind and the irregular-shaped holes left on leaves by their rasping teeth.

Slugs tend to do their feeding mostly at night, preferring cool temperatures and shade from the sun. When temperatures rise, they retreat to cool, shady hiding places such as in the soil and under garden debris. They may consume several times their own body weight each night! Damage can be extensive to leaves, flowers, fruits and other



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succulent plant parts.

These mollusks are hermaphrodites, each adult having both male and female reproductive organs. When they reach maturity at two years, they lay an average of 80-100 round, pearly-white eggs at a time, up to six times a year. The eggs hatch in spring or early summer, and within 3-6 months they start laying eggs.

So to your question, there are several combinations of techniques to use in controlling these slimy pests. The best time for long-term control is to treat the whole garden in the fall, thus ensuring there are fewer adults to lay eggs. Then follow this by a second application in late winter

or early spring to keep the population down.

■ Choose slug-resistant plants. Here are some resistant plants you can use in your landscape: agapanthus, anemone, astilbe, bleeding hearts, coral bells, foxglove, sedums, impatiens, and ferns.

■ Remove damp and dark hiding places. Rake your garden in early spring to remove dead leaves and old mulch, plant debris and slug eggs. Clear your beds of loose boards, and check under pots and garden art for slugs that may be attached. By watering your garden in the morning, this will allow plants to dry by evening when they come out to feed. Keep plants from touching the ground, thus encouraging more air circulation and drier soil.

■ Encourage predators such as toads, frogs, snakes, beetles, and birds. Ducks and chickens simply love to dine on these mollusks as well.

■ Hand-picking these pests two hours after sunset can be very effective, though time-consuming. Drop them into a bucket of soapy water to drown. Never sprinkle their bodies with salt as the salt is damaging to plants and can build up in the soil. Don't squash slugs because their eggs remain in their bodies and will hatch even though the parent is dead.

■ Barriers can be effective in keeping slugs away from your plants. Copper strips can be purchased at local garden stores and, when placed around raised garden boxes or plant containers, the strips will zap the slug with an electric shock when they crawl over them. Lime, ashes, egg shells, and diatomaceous earth can slow them down, but doesn't kill them.

■ Bait works very well. Baits with iron phosphate such as Sluggo interfere with calcium metabolism in the gut

so they stop feeding and die 3-6 days later. Such products are safe around pets, humans, fish, and birds. Metaldehyde (Deadline) is a synthetic product that dehydrates the slug rapidly when ingested, but will not work if there is water nearby or it rains soon after application. Deadline is not safe around pets, fish and edible vegetables, so always read the label carefully. Beer and a mixture of sugar and yeast can be effective baits when placed in a plastic container that is buried so the rim is level with the ground. The slug is attracted to the yeast in the solution and ends up drowning in the container. Be sure and check your traps regularly.

A new study by OSU has found incredible success using bread dough (a mixture of flour, water and yeast). Apparently, the gastropods go "bonkers" over the fermented mixture.

In one instance, over 18,000 snails were trapped in 48 hours! Research revealed the bread dough maintains its effectiveness for at least eight days. Because of its low toxicity, low cost, and readily available ingredients, bread dough bait may become a huge boon to the agriculture and home garden community.

Persistence and using a combination of some of these management techniques should greatly reduce these destructive pests.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.