

Don't Get Slimed: Keep Slugs, Snails Away from Plants Without Danger to Pets, Children

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, April 10, 2020

Q: Help! I just planted my garden, and something is eating all of my little transplants. I think it may be snails. What is the best way to get rid of them?

A: Snails can do a lot of damage to tender seedlings.

I once planted a 30-foot-long bed of marigolds, and the next day, when I went to check on the plants, I found nearly all of them had been eaten back to just one little stalk. I was ready to accuse the goats of getting out and eating them until I noticed the telltale slime trails that snails leave at the scene of the crime.

If you have a lot of damage it is most likely due to the brown garden snail. Introduced from France in the 1850s for food, it's now the most common snail in California gardens.

There are also several varieties of slug, but most should respond to the same controls you will use for snails.



The brown snail was imported from France for people to eat. Now they eat our California gardens. (Photo: Leimone Waite, master gardener)

Snails and slugs are most active at night. Their presence, as you've no doubt learned, can be detected by the silvery slime trails they leave, and, of course, their damage to plants.

To get rid of the snails, handpicking can be effective if the population is not too large, nor the garden too big. Reducing the population can be helped a lot by setting traps. Do this by setting out boards, clay pots or melon rinds as places for the snail or slugs to hide. The next day, turn them over and remove the snails or slugs. With this method, you have to be willing to squash the snail or feed it to your ducks.

Another type of trap uses beer or yeast in water placed in a dish buried at ground level. This lures the snail in to drown in the liquid. These traps work fine if it is not raining and you don't have other critters that will come along and drink

the beer. I personally think there are better uses for the beer.

Pouring bands of diatomaceous earth or wood ash will also deter slugs and snails. These must be applied as thick lines all around the plants and be kept dry to work. This is hard to do during this time of year with rain and heavy dew.

Baits work, but should be placed in a clay pot turned on its side to keep the bait dry.

If you choose to use baits, use ones with iron phosphate, which will not harm children or wildlife. Sluggo and Escar-Go are two common brand names of this type of bait.

Always wet the area a few hours before you try any of these methods to assure that your targets will be active.

You can also limit the number of snails and slugs by using drip irrigation, and by removing whatever might serve as cool daytime hiding places. Many areas with ground cover, such as ivy or vinca, often make for great snail hiding places.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.