

Snails in the Garden....Yuk!

By BJ May, Master Gardener 2002

Following a trip to a beautiful garden center, you spend several happy hours planting lettuce, sunflowers, some succulents and other young flowering plants throughout your garden in a plethora of colors and green leaves. The following morning, you step out in your yard with your morning coffee and look at your lovely plants, then you look more closely. Ugly, irregular holes have appeared in the leaves of some of your plants. Your young lettuce leaves are almost gone. Your heart drops as you think to yourself, ugh, snails or slugs!!!



Snails and slugs are among the most common garden pests in California according to the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources. The common brown snail was actually introduced from France as a food back in the 1850's. It is not recommended that you try and eat those you find in your garden today. Snails and slugs move by slithering along their "muscular foot" leaving a trail of mucous that turns silvery as it dries. That trail and the damage to your plants is often the only evidence that snails or slugs have been at work in your garden. They are a nocturnal pest, hiding in dark damp corners during the day and coming to feed at night. Snails and slugs are hermaphrodites, meaning they can all lay eggs. Adult brown garden snails lay about 80 spherical, pearly white eggs at a time and may lay eggs up to six times a year. It takes about 2 years for snails to mature. Slugs, on the other hand, reach maturity after about 3 to 6 months, and lay clear oval to round eggs in batches of 3 to 40 under leaves, in soil cracks, and in other protected areas.

OK, so you have snails and slugs in your garden, what can you do? Before you run right out and buy some heavy pesticide that may well not get rid of the snails but may get into our water system through the soil, let's see what the University of California recommends. Pest note #7427 found at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7427.html>, offers a number of suggestions to clear your garden of these pesky mollusks. The first step is to try and make your garden as inhospitable as possible. Try to eliminate all places where snails or slugs can hide during the day. Boards, stones, debris, weedy areas around tree trunks, leafy branches growing close to the ground, and dense ground covers such as ivy are ideal sheltering spots. Some hiding places such as low ledges on fences, the undersides of wooden decks, and water meter boxes may not be avoided but you can check these areas regularly and remove all snails as you find them.

If you have a vegetable garden, locate it as far away as possible from places where snails like to sleep. If possible, try to choose plants that snails do not find particularly tasty. You can see a list of such plants on the web site. Handpicking snails is an effective control method. Water an infested area in the late afternoon, then go out at night with you flashlight, rubber gloves and plastic flight and hunt them down. They can be easily handpicked off your plants and dumped in

the plastic bag. That bag just goes out with the trash. For heavily infested areas, it is suggested that you go snail hunting nightly. Once the population has decreased, weekly or less may be enough. Snails can also be trapped by making a snail board. Use a 12" x 15" boards (or any easy-to-handle size) raised off the ground by 1-inch runners. The runners make it easy for the pests to crawl underneath. Scrape off the accumulated snails and slugs daily and destroy them. Crushing is the most common method of destruction. Do not use salt to destroy snails and slugs; it will increase soil salinity.

Copper foil makes an effective barrier around pots or definitive plant bed. Slug and snails will not cross the copper barrier and will not enter the area. The pest note explains this process in detail. There are, of course, available snail baits and some may be effective to some extent. However, any bait containing Metaldehyde is particularly harmful to pets and children and pets may be attracted to such bait. Such bait is not recommended for most home use as it is very toxic and should only be used in very special circumstances. Bait containing iron phosphate is safe for use around children and pets but is slower acting. However, when used in conjunction with the methods mentioned above, it is effective as part of a total program of management.



So, do not despair, if you wake up one morning and see the telltale signs of slugs and snails. You have many alternatives to controlling these pesky mollusks. For more information see the specific website above. For other answers to gardening questions go to www.acmg.ucdavis.edu or call our hot lines: 925-960-9420 or 510-639-1371.

Happy Gardening!