

What am I supposed to do about all the slugs invading my fields? They are under the plastic, on the plants and all over. What solutions are there?

Slugs are well known in production strawberry fields and home gardens. They can be found on the plant at night and in the early morning, and under the plastic or other mulch during the day. Slugs seek moisture, making the humid environment under the mulch of strawberries attractive to them, especially during the frequently wet early season.

Slugs feed on the leaves of strawberries and many other plants and occasionally the fruit, and their rasping feeding leaves ragged holes. It is important for growers and pest control professionals to distinguish this damage from the clearly margined cuts of lepidopterous larvae, since the control measures for each are quite different.

Certain recommendations for slug control, such as the construction of copper barriers around the planted area and use of beer baits, are appropriate for home gardeners but not economically feasible on a commercial scale. Growers can seek to eliminate hiding places such as rocks, weeds, logs and boards to assist in reducing the numbers of slugs. Furthermore, to avoid slug problems, growers can strive to plant away from areas such as orchards, forested and brushy areas with this sort of debris.

Three materials currently registered as molluscicides (pesticides for slugs and snails) for use in strawberries are: Metaldehyde (Deadline M-Ps and Deadline Bullets) and iron phosphate (Sluggo). All are formulated as baits, meaning they are to be consumed by the slug before the poison can work.

The current formulations of metaldehyde bait, while effective in controlling slugs, can be problematic to workers when applied by hand, and can dissolve too quickly in wet conditions. Furthermore, there have been cases of poisoning of companion animals when this material is applied around the home. The recently introduced iron phosphate bait (Sluggo) has very low toxicity to mammals, while offering efficacy in controlling slugs.

There are several pesticides mentioned in this article. Before using any of these products, check with your local Agricultural Commissioner's Office and consult product labels for current status of product registration, restrictions, and use information.

Those growers who have further questions concerning this problem or others affecting caneberries and strawberries are urged to contact Mark Bolda at the UC Cooperative Extension office in Watsonville.