Natural Slug Control

Slugs are in every garden, and cause more damage than most garden invaders. Commercial slug killers are available, but they can be toxic to birds and other wildlife, and are less effective after rain, when slugs are most active.

Here are a few alternative natural, non-toxic methods of slug control:

• Watering Schedule

Far and away the best course of action against slugs in your garden is a simple adjustment in the watering schedule. Slugs are most active at night and are most efficient in damp conditions. Avoid watering your garden in the evening if you have a slug problem. Water in the morning - the surface soil will be dry by evening. Studies show this can reduce slug damage by 80%.

• Beer

Slugs are attracted to beer. Set a small amount of beer in a shallow wide jar buried in the soil up to its neck. Slugs will crawl in and drown. Take the jar lid and prop it up with a small stick so rain won't dilute the beer. Leave space for slugs to enter the trap.

• Seaweed

If you have access to seaweed, it's well worth the effort to gather. Seaweed is not only a good soil amendment for the garden, it's a natural repellent for slugs. Mulch with seaweed around the base of plants or perimeter of bed. Pile it on 3" to 4" thick - when it dries it will shrink to just an inch or so deep. Seaweed is salty and slugs avoid salt. Push the seaweed away from plant stems so it's not in direct contact. During hot weather, seaweed will dry and become very rough which also deters the slugs.

• Copper

Small strips of copper can be placed around flower pots or raised beds as obstructions for slugs to crawl over. Cut 2" strips of thin copper and wrap around the lower part of flower pots, like a ribbon. Or set the strips in the soil on edge, making a "fence" for the slugs to climb. Check to make sure no vegetation hangs over the copper which might provide a 'bridge' for the slugs. Copper barriers also work well around wood barrels used as planters.

• Diatomaceous Earth

Diatomaceous earth is the sharp, jagged skeletal remains of microscopic creatures. It lacerates soft-

bodied pests, causing them to dehydrate. A powdery granular material, it can be sprinkled around garden beds or individual plants, and can be mixed with water to make a foliar spray.

Diatomaceous earth is less effective when wet, so use during dry weather. Wear protective gear when applying, as it can irritate eyes and lungs. Be sure to buy natural or agricultural grade diatomaceous earth, not pool grade which has smoother edges and is far less effective.

• Lava Rock

Like diatomaceous earth, the abrasive surface of lava rock will be avoided by slugs. Lava rock can be used as a barrier around plantings, but should be left mostly above soil level, otherwise dirt or vegetation soon forms a bridge for slugs to cross.

• Salt

If all else fails, go out at night with the salt shaker and a flashlight. Look at the plants which have been getting the most damage and inspect the leaves, including the undersides. Sprinkle a bit of salt on the slug and it will kill it quickly. Not particularly pleasant, but use as a last resort.

(Note: some sources caution the use of salt, as it adds a toxic element to the soil. This has not been our experience, especially as very little salt is used.)

• Overturned Flowerpots, Grapefruit Halves, Board on Ground

Overturned flowerpots, with a stone placed under the rim to tilt it up a bit, will attract slugs. Leave overnight, and you'll find the slugs inside in the morning. Grapefruit halves work the same way, with the added advantage of the scent of the fruit as bait.

Another trap method, perhaps the simplest of all, is to set a wide board on the ground by the affected area. Slugs will hide under the board by day. Simply flip the board over during the day to reveal the culprits. Black plastic sheeting also works the same way.

• Garlic-based slug repellents

Laboratory tests at the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (UK) revealed that a highly refined garlic product (ECOguard produced by ECOspray Ltd, a British company that makes organic pesticides) was an effective slug killer. Look for garlic-based slug deterrents which will be emerging under various brand names, as well as ECOguard.

• **Coffee grounds; new caffeine-based slug/snail poisons**

Coffee grounds scattered on top of the soil will deter slugs. The horticultural side effects of using strong grounds such as espresso on the garden, however, are less certain. When using coffee grounds, moderation is advised.

A study in June 2002 reported in the journal Nature found that slugs and snails are killed when sprayed with a caffeine solution, and that spraying plants with this solution prevents slugs from eating them. The percentage of caffeine required in a spray (1 - 2%) is greater than what is found in a cup of coffee (.05 - 07%), so homemade sprays are not as effective. Look for new commercial sprays which are caffeine-based.



Diatomaceous earth

Diatomaceous earth comes in the form of a chalky powder, and is the natural fossilized remains of diatoms, a type of hard-shelled algae.

Effective treatment for earwigs, slugs, and other garden pests: sprinkle over plants and around edges of garden beds.

Suggestions

I twist a thin copper wire around the base of my tomato plants about 2" up from the ground. The ends are crossed over, but only twisted part way, just enough to stay in place. As the plant grows the copper will expand gradually. Sometimes the wire drops to the base, but it's easy to just slide it up and tighten it a bit. I've had very little slug damage to my tomatoes using this method. Glenda, NY

Mix a solution of 70-80% household ammonia with water, put this solution into a spray bottle and set the nozzle to squirt like a water pistol. I wait till it gets dark-when the slugs are most active, then with a flashlight begin squirting. The ammonia is harmless to plants but the slugs die within a couple of seconds.

It took me almost two summers of doing this almost every night but now I don't have any slugs except for a few visitors from under the neighbor’s fence which do not take much time to get rid of.