

Slugs and Snails and Puppy Dogs' Tails

Written by Bob Cain, certified WSU Clallam County Master Gardener.

“Slugs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails, that’s what little boys, are made of...” (Children’s rhyme)

For me this children’s rhyme always brings thoughts of spring. The puppy dogs’ tails remind me of the beautiful catkins that appear on many trees at this time of year. Slugs and snails, however, do not evoke such pleasant thoughts. These creeping pests are second only to damping off as a source of post germination losses of young plants. Slugs and snails like nothing more than a freshly sprouted plant and will munch it to ground level, killing the plant.

In the Pacific Northwest slugs are more common than snails, although snail populations are rising. The easy way to spot the difference between the two is that a snail has a shell; a slug does not. Both belong to the Mollusk family and are the only land-based members in this family.

Damage from slugs can be swift and fatal. Often the first sign that they are active is a young plant reduced to a skeleton. They are nocturnal feeders, so while you may see some during the day, you can bet that many more are hiding in your garden. You may also see the characteristic slime trail on the soil surface.

There are many methods of controlling these pests. One measure is to tidy your garden and remove hiding places such as rocks, boards, waste plant material and compost piles. These are the places where slugs typically lay their eggs, numbering up to 400 per year.

You should create conditions that favor creatures which feed on slugs such as birds, garter snakes, frogs, toads and predatory beetles. Chickens, ducks and geese can also be efficient in controlling slug numbers.

While handpicking, removing and destroying slugs will work, it is very laborious (and icky!). It is more efficient to attract them to a sunken trap containing stale beer where they fall in and drown.

Because the underside of the slug is very sensitive, another approach to slug control is an irritating mechanical barrier around young plants such as wood ashes, cinders, sand, pine needles, diatomaceous earth, crushed nutshells, seashells or eggshells.

Copper barriers that are at least 2 to 3 inches in height around plants have been shown to be effective; make sure no vegetation dangles over the barrier to provide an alternative slug route.

Chemical control with baits is also effective but must be used with caution. Apply baits to the soil in the evening when the ground is moist and slugs are active. Spread baits evenly, not in piles, unless the bait pile is covered with boards or other objects to stop pets and birds from eating it. If you have pets or young children, avoid baits with the active ingredient metaldehyde. Safer alternatives are those that contain iron phosphate as the active ingredient. When the bait pellets appear moldy they need to be replaced.

Constant vigilance and the use of several control methods will be the best approach to controlling these pests!

Slugs are common garden pests on the North Olympic Peninsula



For more free gardening information about slugs visit the website:

<http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb0968/eb0968.html>