

Pest Busters #3 – Slugs and Snails

So the weather is consistently warm now and the plants are really starting to put up their tender new growth. Now is the time to stop those slugs and snails in their tracks.

If you have a lot of birds, frogs, toads, snakes, ducks, possums, turtles and other critters in your yard, you may not notice a real problem with slugs or snails as they will eat them for you. If you have very few shady wet areas, slugs and snails are probably not a big problem for you either. But if your yard is anything like mine, there are hundreds of hiding places made up of moist shady areas where they can hide, just waiting to munch on my tender hosta leaves.

Slugs and snails are not real particular on what kind of plants they devour. Young tender plants are a favorite. You may notice small holes in the middle of a leaf or along the edges close to the ground. The best way to know if you have slugs or snails eating your plants is to look closely at dusk, at night or just after dawn before the sun starts to burn off the morning dew. Slugs and snails feed the most at these times, so you can usually catch them in the act. You can view some pictures of what their damage looks like here.

There are all types of slugs and they are pretty nasty looking, if you ask me. If you've never seen one, take a gander here. They come in all different colors and sizes, although the ones I normally see in New York are between 1"-3" long and are usually dark brown in color. Snails are a little easier on the eyes, and a little easier on the hands if you hand pick them off your plants, due to their hard shell.

So, you've determined that you do indeed have slugs and snails devouring your plants. If the damage is minimal, not to worry. Most plants can withstand a little nibbling and in fact it can cause some plants to grow even faster. Kind of like nature's way of pruning. Pruning generally stimulates growth, and that's not a bad thing. When we need to worry is if the plant is young, has few leaves to begin with, and does not have a strong enough root system to withstand a little munching.

The best way to stop slug and snail damage is to prevent it in the first place. Turning your mulch in the Spring, Autumn and several times during the growing season will disturb any eggs that are below the surface and expose them for the birds and other critters to eat.

If you see an occasional slug or snail, you can pick them off by hand and dispose of them in soapy water. Once they are dead, just dump the bucket on your compost pile.

If picking them off is out of the question for you (I completely understand, they are nasty creatures), then you can sprinkle them with salt. This will cause them to immediately shrivel up and die. You can also spritz them with equal parts distilled white vinegar and water, just be careful you don't get the vinegar on your plants, as it could damage the leaves or kill the plant entirely.

For the most part, I use a slug bait made from iron phosphate. This is safe for use around other wildlife and does not harm earthworms like other slug baits can. This type of bait can also withstand a few rain storms before turning to mush, so it needs to be applied less

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often. Diatomaceous earth is another product used to create a barrier around your plants that the slugs and snails will not cross. Just make sure it is a horticulture grade and not the kind used in swimming pools.

Some other organic methods that have been known to repel and/or kill slugs and snails are:

- Spreading sand, lime or ashes in a circle around each plant (rough on their bodies, so they won't want to cross that area)
- Using stale beer in a dish as bait (They are attracted to the smell and then they drown in the beer. I've heard Budweiser works the best).
- Use copper wire or copper tape around the plants affected (they will not cross copper).
- Lay boards on the edges of your garden and the slugs will congregate under them. In the morning, just pull up the boards and scrape the slugs into a bucket of soapy water.
- Place sandpaper or crushed egg shells around plants as they won't want to cross this rough surface either.

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