

Slug it out

with slugs & snails

Follow the silver trail to see where it may lead, and hopefully, not to the snails in your garden.

In my garden, there may be an occasional slug turning up in leaf litter but fortunately no snails. An aunt who lives a mere three miles away from me raise's multiple generations of them, without even trying.

This aunt (my dad had nine sisters and four sister-in-laws) asked me if slugs turn into snails at a different stage in their life.

“Hang onto that thought,” I said. “An article meant for you is on its way.”

Here goes!

Slugs and snails are two different species; it's as simple as that. Slugs do not grow shells and garden snails do not abandon theirs, unless they cast away their earthly life and die.

The brown garden snail (*Helix aspersa*) and the gray garden slug (*Agriolimax reticulatus*) are among the most bothersome pests in California gardens. Slugs lack the snail's external spiral shell. Both pests are most active at night and on foggy or cloudy days. They move by sliding along mucus or slime trails secreted by a single foot. Both feed on decaying organic matter, seedlings, and low-growing leafy vegetables and ripening fruits, such as lettuce, strawberries, and tomatoes.

Three tools for managing snail and slug pests are eliminating their daytime hiding places, handpicking them frequently, and trapping them under boards and flower pot's positioned throughout the garden. Use a flashlight at night to spot the pests. Drop pests in soapy water or crush underfoot. Three or four patrols in a row work wonders. The Master Gardener bible, I mean handbook suggests crushing them or using sprays of 1:1 solution of household ammonia and water on the collected snails and slugs will kill them.

Baits are effective, but some can be toxic to pets and children and possibly to the soil. Always read the ingredients on the label. Products containing melathien is not recommended for that reason. (Master Gardeners do not use product or trade names, but can recommend products by the chemical name) Irrigate infested areas before sprinkling baits.

“Drip irrigation limits areas of moisture and results in limiting attractive areas for slugs and snails. You should have fewer problems using drip than by using sprinklers. Barriers of copper strips, diatomaceous earth, wood ash and crushed eggshells will deter slugs and snails. Some of these barriers will need to be reapplied if it rains or if sprinklers regularly soak the areas,” wrote Dan Vierra, a garden columnist for the Sacramento Bee.

It is well known that the yeast in beer attracts the pests, but it can also attract mammals such as cats and dogs that might lap it up or tip it the container over. Pests such as slugs and snails are known to drown in a beer trap (a shallow can filled with beer). Vierra recommends replacing the beer often.

Snails are. . . “just like people,” says Vierra, “they don't like stale beer.”

Vierra once wrote that a Colorado State University study discovered that the snail's favorite beers are Kingsbury Malt Beverage (nonalcoholic), Michelob, Budweiser, Bud Light and Old Milwaukee, in that order. There was no mention of Seattle's upscale microbrews.

Having lived in northern California as well as the Pacific Northwest, I can testify that snails are as familiar to Northwesterners as flies are to cows. Arriving home late at night, I distinctly remember stepping on my threshold landing before entering my house, only to hear the crisp sound of crunching as I put the heels of my shoes down on the shells of my mollusk friends innocently executed them in total darkness. Later, I wondered if the sound of crunching snails my turn up in nightmares. The snails liked to congregate on my wood steps after the sun went down. I really liked that!

Another snail story revolves around my thirtieth birthday, and for me, a significant benchmark in time. At that time, I was living in a remote area in Alaska and living an unorthodox lifestyle. In celebration of my birthday, friends escorted me to a grand old lodge located across an icy bay from Anchorage. It was a beautiful, icy, cold night in November with crackling aurora night displays. The city lights that were far enough away to reflect on the water, but not interfere with the natural light show.

One of my gregarious hosts ordered snails for me without my knowledge and certainly without my consent. The most expensive wine on the menu was ordered to accompany them. My long time fun-loving friend, Cynthia, had a strategy. She was determined to create an experience that was unforgettable. It took more than half the bottle for me to eat one little snail. No guts, you might say.

Admitting that I was reticent is an understatement. The snail, which I allowed to slither down my throat, was surprisingly delicious served in butter and garlic, but then, butter and garlic can make cardboard taste yummy.

The Master Gardener handbook failed to mention the heels on shoes used for crunching snails or enthusiastic snail connoisseurs as deterrents to increased snail populations.

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