

## Weapons of Slug Destruction

Mary K. Arnberg

*"We have descended into the garden and caught 300 slugs. How I love the mixture of the beautiful and the squalid in gardening. It makes it so lifelike." -- Evelyn Underhill, English poet (born 1875).*

Evelyn Underhill may be the only gardener I have ever found who enjoyed the combination of slugs and gardening. The rest of us want them dead, or at least foiled in their plans to slime up, shred, and devour our gardens' tender foliage. To that end, a number of methods have been offered as ways to put a stop to the slugs' enjoyment of our gardens.



First and foremost is sanitation. Clean out your garden debris, piles of leaves, old boards, random pots – anything that would provide a cool shady spot for hiding out and laying eggs. Don't mulch too heavily, either.

Creating traps or establishing barriers is time consuming but can make a difference. A tuna can filled with beer (they prefer Bud and Michelob) and sunk level with the surface of the soil can lure them to a party to end all parties, while coarse sand, diatomaceous earth, crushed eggshells and copper strips can form painful barriers to their attack on your hostas and lettuce. The copper strips actually cause an interaction with their moist bodies and give them a shock.

Encourage natural predators like toads and birds. Mourning doves and robins also love slugs, as do skunks, turkeys, opossums, chipmunks and moles, although "natural" doesn't necessarily mean "welcome" in my garden.

Hunt them at night or in early morning with a flashlight, a bucket of soapy water and fingers in pinching position. Leaving a few large lettuce leaves or grapefruit rinds out overnight near some favorite slug areas can result in a collection of them under the leaves, chewing away. Diligence will make a difference, although bending over and loss of sleep might lead you to choose another method.

Probably the easiest and most effective way to eliminate slugs (and their partners in crime, snails) is to use slug bait. Those containing metaldehyde are poisonous to many creatures, and are never recommended by organic, or just plain concerned, gardeners. The other bait, containing iron phosphate, is effective, easy to use, and can actually help your soil while only bothering the slugs and snails. Ingesting the bait causes the creatures to stop eating and die.

The best time to apply slug bait is in early spring, at about mid to late March when growth is just starting. Sprinkle a small amount (perhaps a tablespoon) around the plants to be protected. It is not necessary to bury the crown of your plants in it. When the shiny, round slug eggs, which were laid last fall, hatch, the baby slugs are delighted to find that first meal waiting for them. They eat it; they die, and two things have happened (three if you count the joy that the process brings to the gardener). First, you have eliminated much of that first wave of slugs and their appetites, and second, you have interrupted the next breeding cycle by killing much of that first hatch. A dead slug does not reproduce.

Iron phosphate is marketed under several names (Sluggo, Escar-Go!, and Safer Slug and Snail Bait) and can easily be found online or at a well-stocked garden center.

You may need to repeat an application again in some areas mid-summer, and should apply it again in early fall, especially if you mulch heavily and/or water a lot, but diligence here, as with the other methods, will result in fewer chewed plants, and more satisfaction for the gardener.