

Slugs: What can you do about them?



Centre for
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Publications

Some tricks that have worked for us in combating the gardeners number one pest.

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Of all the questions we get asked about organic gardening, by far the most common is, "What do you do about slugs?" Unfortunately there is no single magic formula that guarantees success. But we have tested several promising methods which we find work best in various combinations at different times of the year.

Slug lifestyles

To control slugs effectively, it is handy to know something of their habits and patterns of foraging. Slugs dry out easily, so they tend to shelter in damp places during the day, coming out to feed at night. From their shelters they search apparently randomly for food, but once they have found something palatable, they tend to stay there grazing until dawn, usually returning to the same shelter.

On the following night they are able to follow the previous night's slime trail back to the same grazing site. Other slugs can also pick up this trail, and the result tends to be a concentration of slugs on certain 'victim' plants or patches of the garden. The trails can be disrupted by light cultivation, and a quick daily hoeing between rows can be especially effective in dry weather.

Slugs have fairly strong preferences, as gardeners well know, going for young shoots or slightly wilted or damaged foliage. Although they'll eat most things if really hungry, they obviously prefer some plants to others – delphiniums, French marigolds and lettuces being particular favourites! They are most active in spring or early summer when it is warm but humid, and unfortunately this is just the time when plants are most vulnerable.

Hand picking

A trip out into the garden with a torch after dark to pick the little blighters off can yield huge numbers of slugs. This is labour-intensive and a bit messy, but effective in breaking the back-and-forth habit of slugs who have established both a shelter and a good food source. It is best combined with other methods (see later). Carried out every few days in spring, it also gradually reduces the population.

What do you do with the slugs? It's all good protein and a pity to waste, so if at all possible, feed them to animals – we feed

ours to fish and ducks, and the ducks in the local park would appreciate yours! If you have any kind of garden pond with fish throw them in. Alternatively (this sounds unlikely but it tends to work) you can put the slugs in the compost bin. They stay there because it's full of good things to eat. They also help to break down paper and cardboard in the bin, which you should use anyway to improve compost making (see further information). Of course the slugs may well breed in the compost but we have never found slug eggs in the finished material and assume they are eaten by various insect predators also living in the compost.

The beer method

This involves nothing more than placing a shallow saucer or dish of beer with the rim flush with the soil. It is an ideal thing to do with the horrible yeasty sediment at the bottom of home-brew bottles. Slugs are drawn to the beer and drown. The great advantage of this method is that if you're squeamish about killing slugs, it does the killing for you, and you can even convince yourself that it's a pleasant death.

The disadvantages are that if the slugs don't happen to come across the beer trap, they won't fall for it, so you might need quite a few of those traps to protect a large plot. In rainy weather the beer is quickly diluted and washed out, and in hot weather it dries up. An alternative is to bury a used beer-can upright, containing a small amount of beer. This can collect large amounts of slugs more discreetly and is not so easily diluted by rain. When full, put the can in the compost for the contents to be broken down, and retrieve it later for recycling.

The comfrey method

This is a method developed at CAT and seems very promising, although it is fair to say that others have not always succeeded with it. Perhaps they weren't doing it right, so pay attention! In the springtime, slugs are particularly fond of wilted comfrey leaves. Comfrey grows strongly in the spring and is readily available.

About a week before planting out, a pile of comfrey leaves is left in the centre of a plot. The slugs will soon find it and more and more will follow the slime trails. Don't do anything until about the fifth night when the pile will be absolutely heaving with slugs. Remove these and dispose of them. On succeeding nights, further slugs can be removed but there will be far fewer. Finally, the pile of leaves is removed (and composted) and the plot is planted up, with a continuous ring of comfrey leaves laid around the edge of the plot. The comfrey acts as a decoy to any remaining slugs who may move onto the plot from outside. After this, only occasional night-time checks are necessary, and renewal of the leaves every week or so.

The advantages of the comfrey method are high-effectiveness and considerable flexibility. Disadvantages are that you need a source of comfrey and that (for unknown reasons) it is almost entirely ineffective from early July onwards! The first of these disadvantages is overcome by growing your own, which couldn't be easier – and the plant has many other uses. The second disadvantage is a minor one because by July the seedlings are usually big enough to withstand attack, and the hot dry weather inhibits slug activity. We have never found another plant as good as comfrey and nothing that works in high summer. You may still get problems in wet weather. In that case, another method is required. Read on.

Day traps

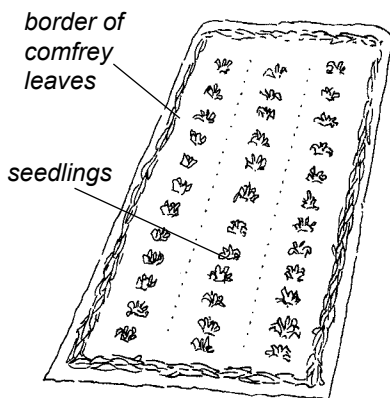
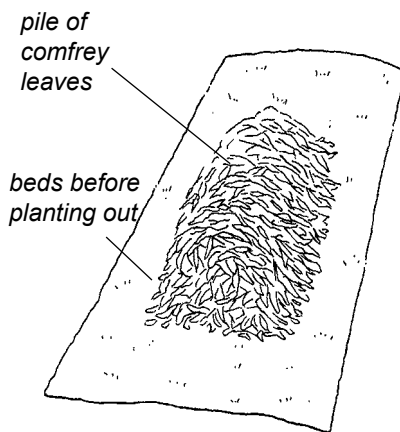
These are simply artificial shelters for slugs that can be easily inspected. Grapefruit halves are traditional and work well, but they quickly dry out and need regular renewal. We have found the most effective traps to be lengths of slabwood obtained free from sawmills, i.e. the round-sided bits that are left behind after sawing a log. 'Proper' planks of wood are not so good because they tend to curl up in the hot sun and don't keep so damp underneath.

The pieces of slabwood are placed between crop rows, where they provide handy mini-paths. You simply turn them up from time to time and remove the slugs. The only disadvantage of this method is that if you don't inspect the traps regularly, you are in fact helping the slugs by providing a very convenient shelter very close to the crops! So be prepared to look at them at least every few days, and if you go on holiday, remove them.

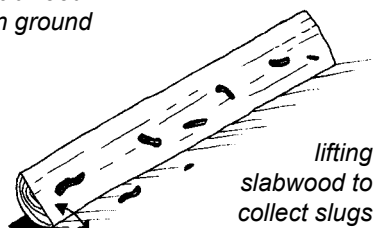
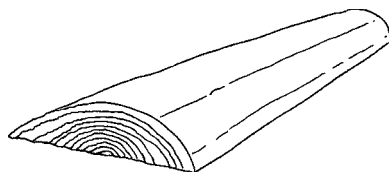
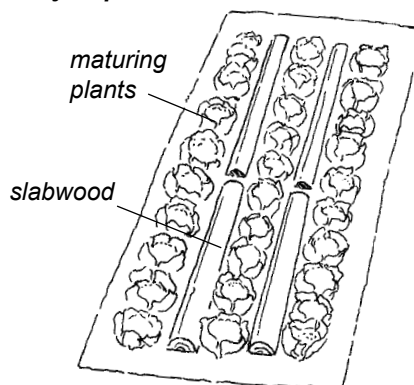
Other methods

Slug pellets are without doubt very effective, but as they are poisonous to other animals we do not use them or recommend their use. If you have to use them it is important to prevent access by birds and pets and they can be distributed thinly under day-trap slabs or lengths of rain gutter placed upside-down between rows. Aluminium sulphate, sold under various trade names such as Fertosan and Nobble, is less poisonous, but we find it rather feeble in its effects. 'Barriers' such as lines of soot, lime, eggshells, hair, sharp sand, prickly leaves, pine needles or ashes we have also found ineffective, especially after rain.

The comfrey method:



Day traps:



But some people swear by these methods so they are worth a try to see if they work for you. If you try any of the methods, remember to do a 'control' without it so you can be sure it's having a real effect.

A new method recently introduced is biological control by tiny worms called nematodes, which you can buy (although supply is rather erratic). It's expensive and only lasts six weeks, but it might get you over the summer holidays.



Further information

If you try these methods and come up with interesting results, we would be delighted to hear from you. Further interesting research is being undertaken at the HDRA, Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry CV8 3LG.

The following publications from CAT are relevant:

- *The Little Book of Slugs*, Allan Shepherd and Suzanne Galant (Eds.)
Includes over 70 humorous anecdotes from the public with the tools, tricks and techniques needed for trouncing the garden gastropod and an extensive list of slug resistant plants, providing all you need to conquer the gardener's most infamous enemy without the use of slug pellets.
- *Composting Secrets* tipsheet
New ways of composting kitchen and garden waste using waste paper and cardboard
- *Urban Gardening* tipsheet
No garden? No soil? No problem!
Useful tips on growing in the city.
- *Making use of Grey Water in the Garden* tipsheet
Reusing household wastewater to irrigate your garden.

The above titles are available from CAT Mail Order – tel. 01654 705959 to order or receive the complete Buy Green By Mail catalogue. Visit www.cat.org.uk/catpubs to order, read reviews or download tipsheets and factsheets. Nematodes for slug control ('Nemaslug') are also available from CAT Mail Order.