

Gardening, slugs and wildlife

By: *Erin McDaid*

Slugs and snails are the bane of many gardeners' lives, causing damage to seedlings and plants but as a result we do tend tar all slugs and snails with the same brush.

There are more than 200 species of slugs and snails in Britain and many of these are rare, threatened and believe it or not, beautiful. The Grey Slug is a staggering twelve inches long whilst the rarity of the tiny Desmoulin's Whorl Snail held up the construction of the Newbury bypass!

Only a small proportion of these species are found in a normal garden setting and some of these are harmless, but a few can be rather damaging to plants. Most people's answer is to use slug pellets, but we tend to forget that these are poisons that can harm other animals and children.

Slug pellets can kill beneficial creatures such as birds, frogs, toads and hedgehogs. These will, if encouraged into your garden, help to reduce the slug and snail populations so it is counter-productive to kill them off. The pellets and other poisons sold to kill our slimy foes can also poison food plants if used in high quantities. All in all I would really recommend that you don't use them.

'What can I do to stop them eating my plants?' I hear you cry. Well I can offer no magic solution, but there are ways in which you can dramatically reduce the damage they cause. Firstly you should try to create a balanced environment in your garden: one that attracts the beneficial creatures which help to control slugs, snails and other pests. Thrushes love to eat snails, but they need somewhere to crack open the shells, so make sure there are a few stones or cobbles in your border for them to use as an anvil. Frogs and toads also eat a fair number, so provide somewhere cool and damp for them such as log pile – they only need a pond during the breeding season.

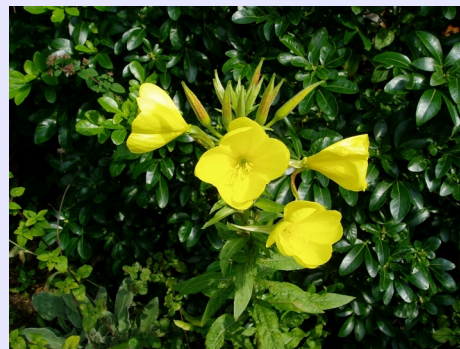
A more ecological approach to gardening, with fewer chemicals also attracts insects such as hoverflies and ladybirds which enjoy eating greenfly and other aphids. If you have a real problem with slugs you could try and grow plants which they don't like eating, such as fashionable grasses and strong scented plants such as rosemary and other herbs which will also attract beneficial insects to help pollinate your flowers, fruit and vegetables.

If you wish to grow plants which slugs are particularly fond of, such as hostas, you could place a 'moat' of grit, wood ash or crushed eggshells around the base of plants or grow them in pots. Whilst slugs and snails will quite happily climb the side of pots, you can stop them getting to your plants by placing a strip of copper wire around the rim or smearing petroleum jelly around the top of the pot.

I'm not suggesting that any or all of these methods will provide a miracle cure but surely it's got to be better than relying upon poisons.

Wildlife gardening tips: spring to early summer

Grow night-scented flowers



Flowers that give off scent at night (like this evening primrose) not only enhance long, warm summer evenings in the garden but attract moths and other night-flying insects, which in turn attract bats.

Plant herbs in flower borders



Many culinary herbs have flowers that will not look out of place in your flower garden. Their flowers are a rich nectar source for butterflies – such as these small coppers feeding from oregano.

Wildlife gardening: comments

Erin McDaid's article *Gardening, slugs and wildlife* [above] provoked some comment from readers of the NWT's South Notts Newsletter Spring 2010 issue – Erin was clearly right when he said, "Slugs and snails are the bane of many gardeners' lives." So we included this brief follow-up item in our Summer 2010 issue...

One reader sent an interesting observation on modern gardens:

"For years my garden was fenced off to contain a dog and was home to a large population of slugs and snails. Since losing her I have altered my fencing in places to allow access to hedgehogs. I now regularly have several visiting and both my neighbour and I have noticed a substantial reduction in slug and snail numbers. My neighbour thinks that this year they will try not using slug pellets.

I think that fencing which keeps the predators out and has no environmental benefit, favoured today over hedges, has much to do with pest problems in the garden."

There are many 'organic' slug remedies available from garden centres, as a quick web search will confirm. Most of these seem to be commercial variants of the metal wire, petroleum gel and gritty irritants mentioned in Erin's article. A relatively new one is made from wool, as pellets which form a mulch when spread around plants; apparently raw wool fibres have microscopic barbs which irritate slugs and snails so they won't crawl over it.

So, plenty of things to try. Erin and I hope you find at least one that works in your garden!