

How to Deal with Slugs in the

EDIBLE GARDEN





What are Slugs?



Slugs can be major pests in the garden. While many species of slugs feed on decomposing organic matter in the soil and leave your growing plants alone, others are more inclined to chow down on your edible garden plants, especially on the young, tender foliage and ripening fruit. Your new seedlings are also choice snacks. Slugs have sharp, serrated teeth which create rough-edged holes in your plants. In large numbers, slugs work quickly to completely decimate your garden – if you don't take action right away, the damage can be significant.

Slugs are not insects. They are terrestrial mollusks. They do not have protective shells, like snails, which makes their soft bodies vulnerable to heat and dryness. They secrete a slimy mucous which is used partly as protection, and partly to help find mates. You can sometimes see evidence of the slime trail on the surface of rocks, on mulch, and on the leaves of your plants.

Depending on the species, slugs have a life cycle between 6 and 18 months. They are hermaphroditic (possessing both male and female reproductive parts) and each one can produce hundreds of offspring during their lifetime. The eggs can successfully overwinter in cold climates. As they don't like to be out and about during the heat of the day, slugs feed at night, when the temperatures are cooler.

Slugs are generally considered to be disgusting and troublesome, but they do serve as food sources for birds, frogs, beetles, and snakes. If you have chickens or ducks, slugs are a real treat for them.

Where do Slugs Live in the Garden?

Slugs like damp, cool areas out of the sun. Look for them beneath logs, in piles of decaying leaves, and in mulch. They also love to hang out just beneath the rims of plant pots, and can give you quite the surprise when you put your fingers down on top of one when picking up the pot!



How to Control Slugs

If you discover slugs in your edible garden, there are several ways to remove them. Some controls are more effective than others, and you may have to use them in combination for success. Several applications may be necessary before you see results. Persistence definitely pays off, however, so don't get discouraged. Handpicking slugs from your plants is highly effective, but admittedly unpleasant and inconvenient, as it must be done at night when the slugs are actively feeding. A flashlight, a pair of gloves, and a bucket of soapy water to drop the creatures into are essential for this job.

Traps are commonly used to capture slugs. There are several types. Some gardeners lay a wooden board in the garden bed and allow the slugs to gravitate to the damp underside of the wood to hide during the hottest times of the day. Simply turn the board over, collect the slugs, and destroy them.

Slugs are attracted to moist fruit and vegetables, as well, so leaving out cut slices of cucumber, or overturning half of a sliced watermelon, cantaloupe, or grapefruit will lure them away from your plants and keep them occupied until you can dispose of them. The old standby beer or yeast traps also act in the same manner. Pour a small amount of beer (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) into a shallow dish and sink the dish up to its rim into the soil in your garden bed. The slugs are attracted to the beer and will fall into the dish and drown. (Yeast traps work the same way. Use a mixture of 1 cup water, 1 teaspoon sugar, and ½ teaspoon dry yeast). The most important thing to remember about trap-style controls for slugs is to remove and replace the traps every day. If you don't, you are left with a smelly, ineffectual mess.

Copper metal may deter slugs. The interaction between the metal and the mucous that slugs produce causes a chemical reaction that slugs find physically uncomfortable. You can purchase copper-based mesh and tape at most garden centres. Put the copper around the entire garden bed, if it is convenient and within your budget. You can also choose to ring individual plants with it.

Tiny parasitic worms called nematodes are efficient and deadly hunters of slugs. Live nematodes may be purchased in garden centres. Different species of nematodes are used as biological controls for various pests, so be sure the ones you get are useful against slugs. (The labelling on the packaging will tell you this information or you can ask a staff member at the store). The nematodes are "drenched" into the soil along with a specialized symbiotic bacteria and water, and they get to work decimating their prey. You don't see the worms, but you know they are doing their jobs when you notice a lot of dead slugs. Nematodes are particularly effective against large populations of the slimy creatures.



How to Prevent Slug Infestation



Mulch is always highly recommended in the edible garden, but if your weather is consistently wet, the presence of damp, cool mulch is irresistible to slugs. If it is a wet growing season and you are worried about slugs, remove the mulch. The mulch may be replaced when conditions become drier.

Encourage slug predators by making your garden a safe haven suitable for birds, amphibians, reptiles, and beneficial insects. Provide habitat, hiding and nesting areas, and avoid the use of pesticides. Do not overwater the garden.

There is not much you can do about excessive rainfall, but you can control how much you irrigate. A lot of moisture in the soil is a slug's delight! Do not water your garden in the evening, as the cool, wet plants will act as slug magnets overnight. Water in the morning, instead.

Throughout the growing season, monitor your plants for signs of pests such as slugs. If you can spot them early and quickly get them under control, you can prevent much of the damage they can potentially do to your edible plants.



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