

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 7-06-05) Slugs © 2005

This spring seems to be a bonanza one for slugs. Which is expected since we have certainly had lots and lots of rain. In fact this year reminds me of the abundantly rainy winters, springs and summers we used to have. The monsoons started in definite earnest in February at least and then continued through the middle of July with July 4 being the rainiest day of all. But, I'm digressing. Here's the scoop on slugs and you can thank my illustrious editor, Joe Irwin, for the topic since he and his wife Caroline are battling an onslaught in their own garden.

So far, researchers have discovered that iron phosphate appears to be the safest and most effective method of controlling slugs and snails in our gardens. The slugs and snails ingest the product and return to their hiding places and die from anorexia. No slimy trails, no emaciated bodies and no slugs in the throws of death to notice. Just good clean hidden deaths. Visit your favorite local nursery or garden center to read the labels on the slug products and you'll see the words iron phosphate. Most recognizable trade names are "Sluggo" and "Worry Free" but you may find other products with iron phosphate. Remember to read the label and follow the label directions when using any garden product for pest control.

You won't need very much iron phosphate and you'll only want to use it around the plants the slugs and snails are devouring. For instance it's good to use around hostas, lilies and leafy veggies. Iron phosphate is safe to use in vegetable gardens and is also safe if birds, pets or children ingest some by accident. Many birders say birds love iron phosphate. Some gardeners just share their plants with slugs and even plant slug attracting plants around their other plants as a decoy.

If slugs and snails are a problem in your garden you'll want to make sure you keep weeds and tall grass to a minimum. These are prime hiding areas for slugs and snails. Slugs and snails also love hiding in rock crevices, under flower pots and under wood left lying around. Try leaving an upturned flower pot in an area you know slugs inhabit. In early morning turn the pot right side up and you'll probably find lots of slugs to dispose of. I prefer the slice and dice method for this problem. I have an old kitchen knife that works wonders. The slugs die a very speedy death.

I went through a very Zen state for a while and would not kill anything in the garden, but I have to admit that I do sometimes still slice and dice a few slugs. But, iron phosphate to me seems much more humane. Probably because I don't see them die.

Researchers do not recommend using ammonia or salt. Slugs and snails are mollusks and it's really horrible to watch them turn their bodies inside out exposing their mantles while they literally dehydrate in front of your eyes. Plus, sometimes they rehydrate when it rains. Sharon Coleman a WSU researcher once told us about the life of slugs and I've never wanted to kill them in such an inhumane way since. (OK, I hear you all snickering because I'm the woman with the machete method.)

So, dear readers and Joe, that's all I have to say today about slugs. I hope it helps. Remember our own banana slugs are a very good thing. They are one of nature's decomposers and have a part in our circle of life. Really, they do. Happy gardening and get out there and buy some iron phosphate.

Contact Peg in care of this newspaper or email ptillery@co.kitsap.wa.us or gardenmentor@yahoo.com