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Slug Control for Homeowners

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Slugs will damage most types of vegetative material in gardens, cold frames and greenhouses. In addition to feeding damage, they leave a trail of mucus where they crawl. Slugs are most damaging to seedlings, but they injure any foliage near the ground where the humidity is high. Slugs also crawl into basements and cellars where they feed on stored produce such as cabbage, carrots, potatoes and other root crops. Their appearance inside homes causes great concern to the occupants.

The **grey garden slug** is the most common slug in Idaho. It is between ¼ to 1½ inches long, depending upon the age of the slug. It is pale, dirty yellow to grey in color. Two other slugs that are found in some communities in low numbers are the large **spotted slug**, which can be almost 4 inches long when extended, and the large, greenish black, **European black slug** that can extend to nearly 6 inches when mature. All three species are similar in their habits.

Slugs are mainly nocturnal, usually coming out of their hiding places to feed in the evening. But, they may also be active on dark, overcast days or in dense shade. Slugs require high humidity, so they are found under boards, logs, in cellars, springhouses, rock piles, along foundations, in damp refuse and in compost piles during the day. Slugs travel on mucus trails they secrete. These routes can be seen the next day, making it possible to find their hiding places.

The mouth of a slug is equipped with a horny file or radula that is used to rasp the substance to be eaten. Slug damage appears as irregular notches, holes or skeletonization of leaves, smooth holes in carrots, potatoes and other root crops or above ground portions of seedlings that are eaten off.

Slugs lay their eggs in clusters of about 25 in late summer or fall. Adults usually die in cold weather; however, they may live through the winter in greenhouses and other warm places. The eggs hatch the next spring to repeat the cycle.

Control

Slugs require moist conditions to live, and they try to avoid dusty, dry or sharp objects when they travel. The following sanitation and habitat changes will help in preventing their damage.

1. Remove hiding places such as old lumber piles. logs, trash, compost piles next to the garden or house.
2. Fill cracks, crevices and replace worn door sills where slugs enter buildings.
3. Thin the plantings around the house so air can dry the soil between irrigations or rains.
4. Grow your garden in the sun; keep weeds and shrubbery away.
5. If you can tolerate them, have a few chickens, ducks or geese around the place during very early mornings when the slugs are active.
6. Birds such as robins, starlings, blackbirds, killdeers and English sparrows eat many slugs and should be encouraged.
7. Toads, garter snakes and predaceous beetles should be encouraged in the garden.
8. Harvest root crops when they are mature, and don't store them in the soil.
9. Keep root crops stored in boxes or racks away from damp surfaces in cellars.
10. Place boards or shingles in the garden and then each morning turn the boards over and squash the slugs. Do this each day until the slug population is tolerable.

11. Pans of stale beer or malt can be placed at ground level so slugs that are attracted will fall in. These pans should be checked daily. You probably will need to add flour to the mixture to make it sticky enough to trap the slugs.

Chemical Control

When the above methods fail or appear impractical, a chemical control is recommended. Several slug baits are on the market. Slug baits come in a foil-wrapped, sealed container to keep the bait fresh. Once the baits are opened, they should be used within 6 weeks or the baits are no longer attractive to slugs. Place the baits where slugs frequent in the evening so they will be fresh but where pets or children will not eat them. Baits containing Mesurol are slightly better than baits containing Metaldehyde. Many brands of slug control chemicals contain these two active ingredients, and when used properly, either will kill slugs.

Pesticide Residues

These outlines are for use based on the best information currently available for each chemical listed. If followed carefully, residues should not exceed the tolerance established for any particular chemical. To avoid excessive residues, follow suggestions carefully with respect to dosage levels, number of applications and minimum interval between application and harvest.

Trade Names

To simplify information, trade names have been used. No endorsement of named products is intended nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

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