

## Our Slippery Friends – Slugs & Snails

In a wet season such as we seem to be having this year, slugs and snails are likely to be everywhere. Not all of them are harmful however and some may even be helpful. Snails generally do far less damage than slugs and the large Roman snails have are said to have a taste for slug's eggs.

It must also be remembered that slugs like every other creature do have a role to play in the greater household of nature. By devouring weak and decaying vegetation, slugs prevent potential infections from spreading through the garden as well as providing food for a number of animals such as hedgehogs, frogs, toads and slow worms.

For a gardener who is desperately trying to grow choice plants, kind thoughts towards slugs are rather difficult to cultivate and many different methods have been employed over the years in order to control. Some have been more and others less successful while others work for a certain time and with certain people. Approaching the problem from a biodynamic point of view it is important to consider the problem scientifically and study the nature of the animal in its widest possible context.

### **Citizens from another age**

A slug is remarkable on many counts. It has no legs yet manages to move in a smooth and seemingly effortless manner over the ground. Sometimes in wet weather when a snail or slug 'climbs' up a window the mystery of this movement can be observed. As it moves and licks its way over an algae-coated window pane, rhythmic muscular movements can be seen rippling their way along the underside of the creature's slime embedded body. To thrive a slug needs to keep itself constantly moist. It does this by surrounding itself with a moist and slimy coating. Indeed to survive it must create its own micro-climate. The drier conditions which we are used to are actually unsuited to slug nature. This suggests, as Rudolf Steiner pointed out, that these creatures are representatives from an earlier stage of earth evolution. He describes how in the distant past, conditions were far more fluid than they are today, solid ground had not yet been formed and the atmosphere was much thicker and even viscous in quality. In such an environment, all kinds of creatures alive at that time would have been adapted to these thickly moist surroundings and slugs would have had no need to create their own micro-climate.

Understanding something of this watery and almost glutinous world provides an insight both into slug nature and the means by which they may be kept in check. During a warm dry spell slugs will hide themselves away to keep cool and only come out in the moist of evening. In rainy weather they extend their range and wander widely.

### **Enhancing light forces**

A shady garden surrounded by tall and rank vegetation tends to be more slug prone. It follows therefore that to control them it is important to bring warmth and light to the garden. When the sun does not do this directly they must be brought indirectly.

The planting of sun loving aromatic plants such as thyme or hyssop can help deter slugs as can mulching the ground with pine needles and aromatic leaves. Spraying aromatic etheric oils or an infusion of pine kernels (recommended by Rudolf Steiner) are similarly useful while the regular use of biodynamic horn silica preparation can encourage a greater concentration of light qualities. Applying them on light/flower days will further enhance their effectiveness.

### **Slug paradise**

Slugs and snails love the rich foraging possibilities of the compost pile and also the good breeding ground it provides. They will congregate in such places. Here they do no harm and actually fulfil an important function by helping to disintegrate decaying material. Given an adequate distance from the garden beds, the compost pile will also attract slugs away from other parts of the garden.

The life cycle of all the slug species is fairly similar and follows the rhythm of the year. Breeding time begins in August and eggs are laid throughout the autumn. Some hatch out after about four weeks and later ones remain dormant until the spring. Most species lay no further

eggs until the new season begins in August. This knowledge can be made good use of.

### **Slug-free compost**

To obtain slug-free compost, ripe and mature compost should be removed from the site of the current pile in early August and be set up several yards away. Any slugs will soon leave and be attracted to the fresh pile of decaying material leaving behind a largely slug-free compost. This should be done in late summer before the slug mating and egg laying season begins. It is also a good moment to collect and store compost for seedling propagation.

### **A gardener's friend**

There are a large number of beneficial creatures which depend on slugs for a livelihood. When tidying up a compost pile this spring, I came across a slow worm nestling amongst the decaying vegetation. Further investigation revealed four more. It was wonderful to find these creatures making their home in the garden.

Living in such places as a compost does render them vulnerable to sharp tonged implements and extra care must be taken while working with a mower or grass trimmer lest these helpful friends be inadvertently harmed. It is always wise to pre-check the long grass or pile of sticks in the corner before launching into them with some mighty weapon.

Slow worms, sometimes called blind worms are related to lizards. They have no legs, can be up to fourteen inches long and can slide rapidly through the undergrowth. They are usually silvery grey to brownish in colour. They thrive in cool damp corners where plenty of leaf litter is lying around and live on a variety of small creatures. They are especially fond of slugs. Along with toads and frogs these creatures are invaluable garden helpers. BJ