

## **Ugh! Slugs!**

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Something eating holes in your plants, but you can't find what it is? Maybe you should go out with a flashlight at night and see what you find. If it's a lower growing plant, especially hosta, chances are you will find slugs eating those irregularly shaped holes in the leaves! This time of year, damage from slugs is really showing up.

Slugs are gray, legless, slimy, slimy critters. They are not insects, but are related to clams and oysters! They are basically snails without shells. They feed on a variety of plant leaves and stems, as well as fruit such as strawberries and tomatoes that are touching or close to the ground.

Their slimy, soft bodies leave a shiny trail of a sticky secretion (a "slime trail") as they crawl along. This mucus slime allows a slug to move over rough terrain and sharp surfaces without bruising its body. They thrive in a moist, cool environment, so with all the rain we've had this year, slug populations are high.

Slugs feed primarily at night, and as morning temperatures rise, they crawl down to shady cool hiding places at the soil surface. During the day, you can turn over boards, pots, and low-growing leaves and find slugs hanging out for the day.

Slugs crawl slowly, and can crawl over a razor blade without being injured. Each slug can consume several times its own body weight in a night, which means damage to your plants can occur very quickly.

There are over 40 species of slugs in North America, and a few of them live in Wisconsin. In western Wisconsin, we rarely find slugs any larger than ½ to 1 inch long, though in other areas they can reach several inches! Adults lay eggs in clusters in damp, shaded soil, which hatch in 3-4 weeks. Slugs can live over a year, and overwinter as both adults and eggs.

The best time to control slugs is BEFORE you see damage! Putting control methods to work early in the season gets the adults before they start reproducing. By this time of year, all those early-summer babies are feeding on your hosta! Still, controlling slugs now can help reduce damage the rest of this year as well as lower populations for next year.

Slugs cannot survive direct sunlight, and need high humidity and cool temperatures to thrive. Eliminating good habitat with hiding places for the slugs is the first step in controlling damage. Boards, stones, large wood chips, etc., can provide slug hiding places. Having plenty of predators on hand also helps. Birds, ducks, moles, shrews, ground beetles, rove beetles, frogs, toads and firefly beetles all feed on slugs.

The tried-and-true way to control slugs is to sink shallow dishes of stale beer below the soil surface. Tuna cans or any steep-sided dish 1-2 inches deep will work. Simply dig a small hole and set the dish inside, so that the rim of the dish is even with the soil surface. Slugs are attracted to the yeast smell, then fall into the dish and drown! Check your traps each morning and scoop out the slug bodies.

Another control method is to place boards other hiding places among your plants. Slugs will attach to the bottom of the board, intending to spend the day there. You can flip the boards over in the morning and kill the slugs. The “squish” method is effective, but messy! You can take your salt shaker out and salt the slugs, which desiccates them very quickly.

Diatomaceous earth can be purchased, which also causes slugs to dry out. This is not a chemical, but tiny sharp-edged particles that should be sprinkled on leaves and soil in the area where damage is occurring. Copper sulfate is also toxic to slugs, and a barrier of copper metal prevents slugs from entering an area.

There are a number of commercial baits sold in stores for slug control. Most contain some sort of food attractant combined with a poison. As with all pesticides, be sure to read and follow all label directions for safe and effective use. Because slugs are not insects, general-purpose insecticides will not work.

Slugs are not harmful to people, but they are definitely harmful to our hosta! Dry weather and the elimination of hiding places will help keep their damage to a minimum!