



Slugs are interesting critters that can chew their way through a lot of plant material. Gray garden or spotted garden slug (*Limax maximus*) is the most common species found in this area. They thrive in cool, damp conditions - making the recent weather perfect for their growth and survival this season. They are HUGE this year. What is a slug? What are the best control methods? Should you worry about the damage?

Slugs are soft-bodied gastropods (not insects) and do not have either a hard body shell or body segments, and they do not possess true feet. They move about by means of a muscle structure on the underside of the body, leaving a slimy trail in their wake. When looking at an adult slug, two sets of tentacles are readily seen on the head - one pair for seeing (imagine the world from a slug's point of view) and one pair for sensory use. Slugs emerge early in the spring with the nice cool, moist weather, and then fade out when it gets hot and dry. Often you will see a re-emergence in the fall - again with the cool, damp weather. Generally there is only one generation per year but they can over winter adults, hungry and ready to feed in the following spring. Anything is fair game as they are not particularly fussy about what they chew on - you may see damage on almost any type of fruit, flowers, stems, or leaves if the conditions are right. The resulting damage is evidenced by irregularly shaped holes that magically appear in the morning - as the majority of feeding is done at night. During the day they can be found resting and relaxing in the cool, damp areas of your yard. Conditions are really what determine the plants attacked - with shade areas often being the hardest hit by slugs. Not only do these areas retain moisture during the daylight hours (for those important resting periods) but they also provide a short commute to succulent plant material for night feeding.

Control of slug damage is an option. In some gardens, total damage is really quite minimal. In others, it can be devastating - not only to the plants but to us as plant stewards. There are a number of different options in control methods. Some control can be gained through changes in cultural practices. As slugs are tremendously happy during the day in damp areas, removing debris such as old timber pieces, decayed plant remnants and excess stones can eliminate resting places for them. Raking mulch to help dry the top layer out during the day will create an unattractive situation. Look at your watering habits. For

many plant health reasons, watering should be done during the morning hours and potential slug damage just gives another reason to bolster that practice. Watering late in the day encourages retention of leaf moisture into the evening hours which makes for an attractive feeding environment for slugs. If products are called for in control of slugs, there are a number of options. The soft body structure makes them easy to kill with sharp textured natural materials like sand and gravel. For areas where these products are not appropriate, diatomaceous earth can be applied to the ground every evening. (Remember, they feed at night.) Diatomaceous earth is a tiny sea particle with sharp edges that, while not harmful to humans or pets, will slice open the underside of the slug. Fermented products (e.g. beer) do work. Small containers inserted to sit even with the ground, and filled daily with a bit of fresh, fermented beverage, will entice the slugs. They fall in and drown. For the slug, in either of these instances, death will occur - for the gardener, these are rather low tech and yet quite satisfying. If chemical products are chosen, the two that are still staples for control are iron phosphate and metaldehyde. For any and all products - read the labels and follow to the letter.

Should you worry about damage? That depends on a few different factors - the intensity of the slug population, the amount and value of at risk plants, and your tolerance level for damaged plant material. Weighing these is an individual activity - you are the best judge of when your treatment threshold has been crossed. I suggest trying cultural methods before attacking with the chemical arsenal. And please try some night observation as well - look at what and where the slugs are feeding. Watching their feeding activity will help you to identify areas with problems. You may be surprised by plants not previously considered as critter targets. Not only will it be enlightening to see what goes at night in your garden, but the neighbors may find your night prowling amusing to observe. Think of the fun - a whole new approach to a neighborhood watch program.