

The control of Slugs the natural way

The adult slug is familiar to most gardeners! Slugs come in a range of sizes and colours depending on the species. The field slug is small (2cm) and grey, while the round back slugs can be relatively large (5-10cm) and black or brown in colour, in some cases round back slugs can have vibrant orange colouring on their foot. Slugs are capable of feeding on flowers, leaves, stems, roots and seeds. Leaf damage is usually shown as leaf shredding or severe notching. Young plants are most at risk as the leaf feeding can be so severe that the plants die.

What is seen less often is the damage slugs cause below the soil surface to seeds, roots etc. This damage can result in seed that does not germinate, and in the case of potatoes, a very poor and damaged crop. Slugs are hermaphrodite, so every individual can lay eggs - up to 300 each slug. Eggs are laid in batches, usually 10-50 in, moist but not waterlogged soil. Most species found in gardens have an annual life cycle lasting less than a year, and lay eggs in any month providing conditions are suitable.

For example, field slugs hatching from eggs laid in the spring will become adults and lay eggs in the autumn. Eggs laid in the autumn will develop into adults the following summer. Because its generations overlap, all stages of the field slug are present throughout the year.

Many slugs spend most of their life below the soil surface tunnelling, rather like earthworms. Those seen on the soil surface represent only a small part of the total slug population. Slugs have a remarkable ability to survive during dry and cold periods by remaining deep in the soil.

Slugs can be controlled biologically by using their natural enemy, the nematode *Phasmarhabditis*. *Phasmarhabditis* is a tiny parasitic eel worm (Nematode), barely visible to the naked eye, which occur naturally in British soils.

The nematodes live in moisture surrounding soil particles; they seek out slugs and enter them under the mantle. Once inside the slug, the nematodes release bacteria. Infested slugs will stop feeding within five days and go underground to die. The nematodes reproduce inside the slug as it dies and are released back into the soil after the slug's death to infect more slugs. The nematodes can be purchased in a powder carrier that is added to water and used as a soil drench applied with a watering can. Given the right conditions the nematodes will last 6 to 8 weeks. The ideal conditions for nematodes are warm damp soil between March & October.

I would say we have the ideal conditions! I have used nematodes on my allotment plots with a great deal of success, used alongside traditional methods of control.

Suppliers of Nematodes

- Defenders 01233 813121
- Green Gardner 01603 7150
- Organic Gardening Catalogue 0845 130 1304