Snails and Slugs

Snails and slugs rank among our most despised garden pests.

These slimy mollusks emerge from hiding at night and chew holes in leaves and flowers of many succulent garden plants and fruit. Slugs and snails are similar in structure and biology, except slugs lack the snails’ external spiral shell. Management requires a vigilant and integrated approach that includes eliminating moisture and hiding spots, trapping, setting up barriers, and handpicking. Baits can be helpful but by themselves don’t provide adequate control in gardens that contain plenty of shelter, food, and moisture.

How do you know snails and slugs are causing damage?

• Because they feed at night and hide during the day, you might not observe these pests at first. Go out at night or in the early morning to view them in action.
• Other pests can cause holes in leaves, flowers, and fruit. Look for the shiny slime trails slugs and snails leave behind.

What can be done to reduce snails and slugs?

• Remove daytime hiding places such as ivy, weedy areas, debris, and boards.
• Place your garden in the sunniest spot possible. Remove garden objects, plants, or ground cover that can serve as shady shelter.
• Reduce moist surfaces by switching to drip irrigation or by running sprinklers in the morning rather than later in the day.
• Make sure the garden is mollusk-free before planting, then erect a copper barrier around it. Use a 4- to 6-inch-wide band of copper, buried an inch below the soil and bent over at the top or attached around the edge of a raised bed.
• Consider snail-proof plants such as impatiens, geraniums, lantana, nasturtiums, and other plants with stiff leaves and highly scented foliage such as sage, rosemary, and lavender.

Quick Tips

For more information about managing pests, visit ipm.ucanr.edu or your local University of California Cooperative Extension office.

How can I manage snails and slugs without using pesticides?

• Regularly remove snails from shelters such as fence ledges, undersides of decks, and meter boxes.
• Build a trap using a board raised off the ground by 1-inch runners. As mollusks collect under the board, scrape them off and destroy daily.
• Place beer traps in your garden and dispose of trapped snails and slugs daily.

Use a board that is raised off the ground about an inch to trap snails daily.

What about pesticides?

• Pesticide baits will not be very effective unless you also remove shelter, food, and moisture.
• Iron phosphate baits are safe for use around dogs, children, and wildlife.
• Ferric sodium EDTA is a newer active ingredient that works similar to iron phosphate. This product is not organically acceptable.
• Metaldehyde baits are especially poisonous to dogs and birds. Metaldehyde also loses its effectiveness rapidly in sunlight and after rain or irrigation.
• Irrigate before applying bait and apply in the evening on warm days when mollusks are active.
• Scatter, don’t pile, bait around sprinklers and in moist, protected areas where mollusks travel. Always read pesticide labels before applying the product.

What you do in your home and landscape affects our water and health.

• Minimize the use of pesticides that pollute our waterways and harm human health.
• Use nonchemical alternatives or less toxic pesticide products whenever possible.
• Read product labels carefully and follow instructions on proper use, storage, and disposal.