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In defense of slug tea

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Slug tea partially consumed by algae looks like a fertilizer as well as a repellent. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Harstine Island gardeners have a common lament: slugs are the scourge of the land. Every one of us has found a plant reduced to a lacquered stump or stick figure shredded as if by a 12-gauge shotgun blast.

It's small comfort that animals eat them, because most would rather not. The banana slug's slime is numbing, and the black slug's slime is so thick that Swedes have used it to grease wooden wagon axles since the 18th century.

Slime aside, slugs are a favorite food of garter snakes. Many ducks gobble them up, and one permaculture farmer uses carrion to lure crows, who then make dessert of his slugs. Imagine, farmers luring crows!

Organic farmers might only use baits if they also use nonchemical methods of slug control. Often this means roaming the gardens at dusk with scissors, which not only reduces slugs but feeds those that remain. The next night one might be able to return to the same spot and kill the slug feeding on last night's sacrifice — my record is four.

One Harstine gardener rebuilt her garden on a foundation of scratchy landscape fabric, figuring the slugs wouldn't cross its forbidding texture. It's a lot prettier than the cardboard I use to suppress the weeds that give slugs cover.

Without slugs, we would be inundated with wood. In addition to bacteria that break down tough plant fibers, slug guts contain over 3,000 enzymes that process our abundant forest litter into waste that is much easier for bacteria and fungi to use. Replenishing microorganisms is essential, since there are more of them in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on earth.

Such is the balance that our native banana slug helped maintain before the arrival of the European black slug, which exaggerates the process to disturbance. Soil health and texture, or tilth, is partially dependent on slugs.

If they're so good for soil, why not steward the process? Just as composting aims to accelerate the production of humus (the organic component of soil), one should be able to enhance the diversity of soil life using slugs, right?

Fertilizing was not the original aim of Maria Thun and Rudolf Steiner when they brewed slug tea. Their intent was to repel slugs from crops. Steiner founded biodynamics, the ancestor of regenerative farming, in 1924. Among other practices it directed agronomy according to the astrological calendar — for example, the date of this publication is ideal for planting. Notwithstanding its woo-woo trappings, biodynamics has been adopted by wine growers from the Willamette to Chile to Bordeaux.

Thun gathers 50 to 60 slugs when the moon is in Cancer and leaves them to rot in water. When the moon is in Cancer again four weeks later, she strains out the solids to spray crops with the viscous liquid. Then she catches more slugs to repeat the process.

Slug tea sounds worse than it is. After 30 days it smells no worse than a nitrogen-rich fertilizer, and if the buckets are left in the sun they will grow a bumper crop of algae that diminishes that fragrance, presumably by consuming some of the nutrients. Strained, it makes a spray that has noticeably diminished slug attacks on my crops, but it must be reapplied periodically and works best in conjunction with other measures like wood ash and ground eggshells. Its consistency lacquers other repellents onto the leaves without affecting growth.

The rich crimson color on the bucket walls, though absent in the liquid, briefly appeared in the stem of a pea plant after several applications. Though you have only a three-day window before the moon moves into Leo, in my experience applications in other phases seem just as effective.

Spraying or “peppering” unwanted lifeforms with extracts of themselves doesn’t stop at slugs. Peppering is a process of sprinkling an area with the burnt remains of whatever one wishes to exclude. The production and application of peppers is governed by the stars, whether it’s weeds (seeds), insects, or mice (skin). The cat is far better at mouse peppering than I’ll ever be, and he actually enjoys it.

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