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Nature bats last

Peninsula Permaculture · May 19, 2022 · Page A-7



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Raccoons won't spill Sluggo from a beer can into their mouths. They'll tear the can open.
(Photo courtesy of Alex Féthière)

Readers of this column from February of last year may recall my trials of beer traps combined with Sluggo to thin slug populations. Favorite tipples were chosen, innumerable slugs died, and their population hasn't fully recovered in 2022.

Three species of garter snakes (*Thamnophis* spp.) and the narrow-collared snail-eating beetle (*Scaphinotus angusticollis*) have proliferated as well. I have created habitats for them after reading about their needs. I have seen these predators eating slugs, and had enough time to grab the popcorn. It's not fast food.

The upshot has been Green Zones, as it were, where slugs are not destroying everything and my plantings flourish. Anything goes outside of these, and legions of massive slugs are yet scouring the woodland for my forest garden outposts.

Maintaining slug traps containing beer and Sluggo is not practical outside of an acre or two. This is particularly true when raccoons get hip to the joys of Sluggo and cheap beer. You'd think this revolting analogue of breakfast cereal would put them off, but raccoons really have earned the name "trash pandas."

I wrote last year of how they opened the traps and dumped the Sluggo and beer down their gullets, leaving the plants unprotected so that the slugs could ravage them. Days after each breach, I found upended traps among the stumps of my baby bushes and groundcovers.

I covered some traps with milk crates stacked with pavers, and these were unmolested. I couldn't patrol and refill every trap station across acres every day, and plants died.

When I hit on the idea of putting a capful of Sluggo in a beer can and throwing it on the ground like it's a frat lawn ornament, I thought I'd found the crossroads of sloth and efficiency. This practice worked for some time: the scent of beer traces and Sluggo would lure the slugs, they'd eat the bait, crawl out of the cans and eventually die.

The aluminum cans' tiny openings and metal structure protected them from raccoons. If you picked the right colors you could easily see them in any undergrowth.

But nature bats last! When I found beer cans rent asunder and peppered with tooth marks, I marveled at raccoons' determination. I was also annoyed because I enjoy most garden activities more than outsmarting raccoons.

The most recent iteration of this practice has been to bury the beer can containing a capful of Sluggo on its side. A paver or heavy rock placed atop the buried beer can seals the chamber — even the most talented raccoon hands don't have the strength to grip and move a concrete paver.

If you must leave cans exposed, you might try steel ones such as soup cans. Punch a hole in the lid with a church key can opener and funnel in some Sluggo. Imagine a raccoon testing her teeth and claws on that.

It's our own fault — those of us who feed raccoons and deer. These animals become dependent on our handouts and instead of foraging, they look for built environments when they're hungry. Similarly, we look for a Fred Meyer, QFC or Safeway instead of a forest.

A friend who railed against food stamps for wastrels while simultaneously feeding wildlife didn't acknowledge my critique when I called her program "EBT for deer." Raccoons, accustomed to her buffets of leftovers, moved into the underside of her house when it was exposed to replace the insulation. "Don't feed it if you wouldn't live with it," I had warned her.

Human agency usually contributes to an animal imbalance. Reducing a surplus while boosting a related dearth is permaculture: it's not just better for me, but for everyone involved.

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Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, May 19, 2022, page A-7.

Transcribed from the page scan in the SmallTownPapers archive: <https://smc.stparchive.com/Archive/SMC/SMC05192022P07.php>