

Yard and Garden – 08-17-2013- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Easy to grow, nearly maintenance free and shade tolerant, they are one of the most popular plants grown in the home landscape. Their decorative leaves come in a wide range of colors, shapes, textures, and sizes. Unfortunately, almost all are prone to infestations from a creepy, crawly, slimy pest. The plant I'm referring to is the beautiful hosta, and the pest is the common garden slug.

At this time of year, I frequently hear from gardeners complaining about their hosta leaves. Their comments usually sound like this.

“Earlier, my hostas looked great, but lately I've been noticing holes in the leaves and almost daily more and more appear.” Knowing the damage was not caused by hail, they usually assume it must have been caused by an insect pest. Time and time again, they say, “No matter how closely I



examine my hostas, never do I see any insects feeding on the leaves. What is happening?” Although grasshoppers might sometimes be the culprit, more than likely the devastation is caused by the common garden slug.



A slug is not an insect but rather a tiny mollusk somewhat like a snail but lacking a shell. The reason one rarely, if ever, sees slugs feeding on the leaves is because they are nocturnal pests. They only come out at night or on cloudy days when temperatures are above fifty degrees, and there is ample moisture from rain or watering.

Slugs need a damp environment to survive and hide during the day in soil crevices or under rocks, mulch, or in the lower dense foliage.

Slugs are hermaphrodites: they have both male and female reproductive systems. As they move along, they leave a slime trail. Other slugs can pick up on the same trail left from the night before creating a slug-feeding frenzy on the host plants. Adult slugs are capable of overwintering in the soil and can live for many years.

Slugs lay their eggs in the soil often near the crown of hostas. When the baby slugs hatch, they can do tremendous damage to the new growth of the hosta. Drenching the soil in early spring around the crown of the hosta plant with an ammonia solution of 3 ounces of household ammonia to 16 ounces of water is an effective and inexpensive method to destroy the hatchlings.

Slug damage to hosta leaves can be severe. Sometimes the leaves end up with so many holes they take on a lace-like appearance.

As with most gardening problems, controlling slugs begins with the basics. First, clean up the garden and try to eliminate hiding places for the slugs. Minor slug problems can be controlled by hand-picking. Carefully check around the base of damaged plants and all potential hiding places that are moist and dark. Searching for slugs at night with a flashlight increases the odds of finding them.

One can create slug traps by using overturned pots, pieces of board or wet, folded newspaper. Place these traps on the soil near hostas overnight. In the morning, discard any slugs. If one prefers a home remedy, use beer. Slugs are brewski-loving critters. Simply sink pie pans or similar containers into the ground with the top edges level with the soil. Pour some beer into the pan. Slugs have little, if any, self-control when it comes to beer, and they soon drown their sorrows and themselves in the beer. It's best to replace the beer on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, even if the pest is destroyed, the damage to the hosta leaves remains for the balance of the season. As unsightly as the leaves may appear, avoid removing them. No matter how unappealing they look, they still undergo some photosynthesis, the food making process necessary to keep the plant alive.

There are a number of great products for controlling slugs on the market. Note, the chemical used in most slug and snail killers is called metaldehyde — and it is deadly to dogs and cats. One called Sluggo ® is an organic treatment that doubles as a fertilizer. Sluggo is approved by the OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute). It is very effective and can be safely used around pets and wildlife.

Protect your hostas; go slug hunting tonight.