



THEY'RE SLUGGING IT OUT

By Irene Virag

THERE ARE SOME subjects that simply require extra attention, and the shell-less monster that is the gardener's arch-enemy is one of them. So consider this "Slugs – The Sequel."

My call for suggestions on how to deal with these voracious gastropods has already given birth to one column. But slug fighters are indefatigable and communiques from the front keep coming, even though the enemy's ranks may be down slightly because of the drought. My mailbox is overflowing. It's good to know that so many of you out there are enlisted in the struggle against these slimy creatures. And don't tell me they're not slimy; I mean, they glide along on their own secreted mucus. Ugh. Besides that, they have file-like tongues and around 100 rows of tiny teeth, with about 90 teeth per row.

Anyway, in the interests of gardeners everywhere with holes in their hostas, I think it's incumbent upon me to pass along some of this new correspondence and take another shot at what Joe Haber of Centerport so aptly calls "the damn slug." I mentioned Joe in last Sunday's column but omitted an important weapon in his arsenal – a major cleanup in fall and early spring. "Eliminating rotted material and leaves," Joe writes, "will get rid of thousands of slug eggs." Most of the new communiques recommend a strategy I've always considered a last resort - night patrol and hand-to-hand combat. It's not just that I'm reluctant, even a little lazy, about searching in the dark; it's also that I tend to shy away from direct confrontation. But if beer and ammonia, slug bread and copper flashing, grapefruit rinds and cabbage leaves don't do the trick, it's something to consider.

My most dramatic mano-a-mano report comes from Ilse Wolff of Northport. Her story verges on the epic. It's an action-packed tale accurately portraying the violence that slugs stir in the most gentle of souls. It's so fast-moving that I'm reprinting it in its entirety: "It had rained gently during the night and I went into the garden early next morning to cut some flowers for the table. The sun was shining and the flowers looked lovely. As I bent over to cut my first Rudbeckia, I saw a big ugly slug out of the corner of my eye, crawling across the lawn about two feet away from me. Well, the scissors were handy, and before I could even contemplate any action, my enormous dislike for slugs had guided my hand and – snip – the beast was cut in half. And right

next to it, six inches away, was another, and then another, and then another, and another after that – a whole army of slimy monsters! They were all trying to find their way back into the moist shade of the surrounding pachysandra.

"For the next 15 minutes or so, I never straightened up, I just kept on cutting and cutting like a madwoman. I started to count my victims and by the time I was finished I had conquered over 500 slugs! I went into the house with a stiff back and without flowers. Later that day I reluctantly checked the battlefield, but the sun had mercifully dried up everything neatly.

"This scenario was repeated the next morning and twice more within the following week after another rain. I had written the number of conquered slugs on a piece of paper and at the end of this remarkable occurrence I had snipped more than 2,400 slugs in half! It was disgusting and my friends were considering confinement or at least therapy for me. However, after this slugfest I have never had another invasion again. I guess word must have spread among this slimy, slippery population, that my house was not a good location to decimate the flowerbed."

Ilse's letter should encourage Carole Honig of Great Neck, who writes that "I have a really weird way of dealing with slugs. I go slug-hunting at night." It's not so weird. I hope Carole doesn't think she's a lonely warrior – no gardener is an island. But she does have an original touch worth mentioning.

She uses chopsticks as well as a container with a lid and the requisite flashlight on her nocturnal forays. Sushi lovers have a step up on this method – if you want to try it you need a certain dexterity with chopsticks.

"When I spot a slug," Carole writes, "I pick it up with the chopsticks and then put it into the container. I do this for about 2-3 nights in a row, and this usually stops any further problems." I don't know if Great Neck is a slug center but it certainly breeds resolute slug slayers. Another correspondent from that community, who asks not to be identified, doesn't mess with tongs, chopsticks, shovels or trowels. Anonymous uses a plastic newspaper delivery bag as a glove and another as a receptacle.

"The best time of night," Anonymous writes, "is after 11 p.m. when the air is cool and moist. The slugs give off small shock-like tingles so I keep them at the bottom of the bag. They can also eat or make a hole in plastic with their secretions so I sometimes double-bag." Anonymous, who follows slime trails with a flashlight, bags as many as 20 to 30 slugs a night. This veteran hunter recommends checking around tree trunks, along the sides of walls, under pot rims and between planters. "If there's a cool hiding space, they'll be there." This is grim stuff but like the saying goes, war is hell. If you're like me and hesitant to follow any of these chop-and-bop methods, you might think about slug bread. I mentioned this in another column but thought I'd add a tip from Trudi Boehm of Elmont. She uses a mixture of flour, sugar, water and yeast similar to the recipes in last Sunday's column. "If you leave it out on the counter overnight or until the whole mess starts to ferment and bubble," Trudi advises, "it will be ready for the slugs' final meal." She sets it out in old margarine or cottage cheese containers, but saves some in the counter stash.

"To whatever remains in the counter mixture just add more water, sugar and flour. This will start to work and produce more fermented liquid, a never-ending supply of slug slammer." As Trudi explains the efficacy of this potion, the mixture contains "just enough alcohol to make it attractive to their palates and the flour and sugar makes their bodies swell and die." Then she makes a cosmic point. "If one is a member of PETA People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, this might not be on one's approval list, but in the garden it's the insects against us and this certainly is an organic way to fight slugs."

To which I can only say, once again, "Amen."