

Helpful hints from your Oregon State UNIVERSITY

Extension Service

Pull weeds as they pop or plants will suffer

BY KYM POKORNY
OSU Extension Service

Unseen and seemingly uncontrollable, weeds have a way of taking over the garden in the time it takes to put the hoe away.

Keeping weeds under control takes time and patience, but the effort is worth it, said Chip Bubl, horticulturist with Oregon State University Extension Service. Plants – especially vegetables – have a hard time thriving in the company of unwelcome neighbors that compete for water, light and nutrients. Some also harbor pests or diseases.

“Weed seedlings are vulnerable to hoeing, hand pulling or rototilling,” he said. “Mature weeds are more difficult to re-

move. Since weeds often emerge before vegetable seedlings, they’ll suppress the growth of your vegetable seeds. The time you spend weeding in the two to three weeks after you plant seeds will be time very well spent. Weed early and often.”

If you keep weeds at a minimum, your vegetables, annuals and perennials have a better chance of flourishing. Here are a few guidelines from Bubl on how to control these stubborn plants:

Organic mulches such as leaves, hay and grass clippings keep weeds under control and improve soil as they break down. Apply a layer of organic mulch two to four inches deep to your

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Slug it out with spring’s slimy pests

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Follow the glistening trail and you’ll find the gardener’s most familiar, frustrating and certainly slimiest pest, the common slug.

It’s spring, after all, and as soil temperatures start to climb, slugs rise from their winter hiding place underground to munch tender seedlings, emerging perennials and even seeds.

“What slugs want is a place that’s warm and moist,” said Claudia Groth, an Oregon State University Extension Service master gardener. “That’s why they’re coming out now. The soil temperatures are getting to be above 50 degrees, which is perfect for them.”

Slugs aren’t crazy about winter and summer. They bail from cold or hot weather. But fall and spring are agreeable seasons for slugs. In the perfect conditions of autumn when the heat starts to wane and the first rains come, the mollusks lay eggs in clusters called clutches, according to Groth, a horticulturist who has made slugs her specialty.

The eggs hatch fairly rapidly and the fast-growing slugs wait it out, showing up in spring to scrape and shred plant leaves with tongues lined with thousands of tiny, extremely sharp



courtesy photo

The fresh growth of seedlings, annuals and newly emerged perennials are manna to slugs, so start a control program now.

teeth.

“In fall, you’re trying to kill them off before they lay eggs,” she said. “Now that your plants are poking their heads up, you need to protect them, because once the leaves are nipped, the damage is there all summer.”

The pests are particularly fond of lettuce and other salad greens, broccoli, beans, hostas, strawberries, primroses and daffodil flowers. More sturdy plants like ferns, sedums, ornamental grasses, bleeding heart, heuchera, hellebores and most herbs fend them off reasonably well. Woody plants are also usually unbothered.

Since slugs go on attack at night and look for protected places during the day, you’ll find them under ground covers or mulches and in thickly planted perennial or annual borders.

“Many gardeners grow plants tightly in their beds to keep weeds from growing,” Groth said. “That’s an environment that provides them with a 100

percent hiding place all day.”

Slugs will crawl beneath almost anything where it’s dark and moist, including boards, bricks, pots, loose stepping stones and pavers and debris left lying in the garden.

“So the first thing to do when starting a control program is to clean up the garden,” she said. “Don’t leave things all over the yard. They can even hide under garden gloves.”

Raise pots onto bricks or “legs” purchased for that purpose. Pull mulch away from favorite plants. Remove weeds where the pests like to nestle down. Tidy under porches and other raised structures.

Although sanitation is the first line of defense, there are plenty of other methods for control. Get started now. Young plants are most susceptible. Here are Groth’s recommendations:

Water in the morning. “If you water in the evening, it’s wet until early in the morning and you’ve given them the best en-

vironment when they come out at night hungry,” she said.

Put out beer traps. Use a pie plate or bury a plastic yogurt or margarine container up to about an inch from the rim. Pour in beer. Remove dead slugs daily and refill with beer.

Don’t use salt. It can build up in the soil and damage plants.

Attract predators such as frogs, ground beetles and, yes, snakes.

Create an artificial hiding place by placing a board in their favorite places. To make it especially attractive, grind up lettuce and brewer’s yeast (not baker’s yeast) and put that under the board. In the morning, lift the board and remove slugs. Drop them in a bucket of soapy water.

Go out at night with a flashlight or head lamp and handpick them.

Get a duck, which will make a quick dinner out of slugs, but be sure to check with your city first. Some don’t allow them and there are restrictions.

Tape a wide (3-4 inches) strip of copper around the top of a pot or the top edge of a raised bed.

Also, use bait. There are two types. One is a synthetic bait that contains metaldehyde, which is toxic to humans and can be fatal to dogs if eaten in large amounts. The other contains iron phosphate, which is considered very low in toxicity, according to the National Pesticide Information Center at OSU. It can be used around pets and wildlife and in organic vegetable gardens.

When baiting, scatter rather than making piles or bands. “If you use piles or bands,” she explained, “slugs can go right by. If you scatter, they’re likely to encounter it.”

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