

psilocybe mushroom when given a choice"

Which leads me to wonder just how much taxpayer money is going to fund slug research. We're talking here about a squishy, slimy critter with a really high yuk factor, 27,000 teeth (yes, per slug mouth), green blood, and the ability to mate with itself should the need arise. That last attribute alone should be enough to get the social conservatives up in arms.

Even though most people find them disgusting, slugs undoubtedly don't care. They must think they've found a little piece of heaven here in the Pacific Northwest. The area provides, in obscene excess, the three things slugs need in order to flourish: abundant plant life, moisture, and soil with at least some trace of volcanic activity. You can just see the head slug in a herd of immigrating great grays arriving at the Oregon border, waving its eyeball stalk at the scenery, and shouting back to the rest of the crew, "This is it, guys! Unpack the trunks."

The slug that Northwest gardeners fight most often is the great gray garden slug. At just four inches, this slug makes up in speed (well, relatively speaking) what it lacks in length. Great grays can crawl up to four times faster than the banana slug, which clocks in at about 32.5 feet per hour on a good day. ("I wish I could remember more," the banana slug told the police after being mugged by two great grays. "But it all happened so fast.")

The great gray has another characteristic besides its speediness: It's a cannibal. Yes, these charming creatures actually attack and eat other slugs, mostly the gentle, nonaggressive native slugs. This is where its speed comes in most handy, sort of like a cheetah in an all-out sprint

The morning after I thought I'd cleared all the slugs from my garden, I took a reconnaissance tour and found more slugs. Slug trails wound through the garden beds and led to clever hiding spots—under tulip leaves, under the winter pansies, under the top row of flat rocks lining the steep side of the flower border. Where had they come from? How could I get rid of them? This called for research, rather than action. I left the slugs where they were and retreated inside to a cup of tea and *Basic*.

Apparently, I had three options: I could bait the garden with poison, set up slug hotels filled with beer, or commit myself to spending a half hour each morning pawing through the dirt looking for slugs. More out of curiosity than in search of a solution, I turned to the section on poisons.

Metalddehyde was listed as the poison of choice for slugs and snails. It's related to methanol, or wood alcohol. "Be careful with metalddehyde mixed with bran; it's highly poisonous to birds and pets," the book warned. Highly attractive, as well. That wasn't very comforting. I scanned the general discussion about chemicals. The warnings continued: Wash your hands and other exposed skin. Wash any clothing that comes in contact with the poison. Store it under lock and key.

There's good reason for all the caution. Metalddehyde doesn't just dispatch slugs and snails; it can seriously harm the human nervous

system, even cause death at the right dose. Much smaller amounts, of course, can harm or kill birds and small mammals—squirrels, raccoons, my cats.

Other popular slug-bait ingredients include carbamate compounds and methiocarb. Both are more toxic than metaldehyde. Methiocarb should never be used around the home gardener's veggie plot (or any commercial grower's food crop, for that matter), and carbamates are so strong they kill off earthworms, the most welcome workers in any garden.

Now, I'm not a granola head with a different Guatemalan string bag for every social occasion and a fierce dedication to a meat-free life-style, but I do think it's important to leave the earth a little better, rather than a little worse, from my gardening efforts. And I was still feeling miffed about the use of herbicides in our backyard last fall. So chemical poisons were not an option for my garden beds.

There had to be something else that would work. On Therese's advice, I went to the main branch of the Multnomah County Library and paged through back issues of *Organic Gardening* magazine, looking for a solution.

Boy, did I find them.

Nonchemical slug controls are like recipes for meatloaf. Everyone and his Aunt Fanny has one they swear by. Many of these favorite solutions are barrier methods. One of the most common is spreading diatomaceous earth (clay kitty litter) or bark dust around susceptible plants. The idea is that as slugs crawl over the sharp-edged particles, they'll be cut to smithereens, all their bodily fluids will seep out, and they'll dehydrate. Presto! Dead slug. However, given that your

basic-issue slime-encased slug can crawl along the edge of a razor blade or cross a pile of glass shards without sustaining any damage, I find it hard to believe that kitty litter would be effective.

Another barrier method is to sink wide copper bands into the ground. The theory behind this is that slugs who touch the bands will receive a mild electric shock, turn around, and head into your neighbor's yard. This method is supposed to work well, but those copper bands don't come cheap. And I needed cheap.

I called Therese.

"Hey, what was that about beer and slugs?"

"Sink a kitty food can or a cottage cheese container into the ground and pour in some beer at night. Then check it the next morning. Sometimes the cottage cheese container is best because you can cut a little hole in the lid, put the lid on, and if it rains the beer won't get diluted."

"Right." I shuddered. Visions of soggy, limp slug bodies flashed in front of my eyes. "Anything else?"

"Some people use salt. I think if you're close enough to salt them, you might as well just pick them up and toss them in the garbage. What's left, metaldehyde? We don't use it, but I guess it works."

Trust Therese to know what the appropriate poison was even if she wasn't using it.

"Nope, no metaldehyde here either," I said. "Thanks anyway." I heard a confused babble on the other end of the line. "What?"

"Hang on," Therese said.

I hung on. A new voice came across the phone lines. It was our friend Julia. "Meg? Wanna know how my grandmother Julia

Zumstein handled slugs?"

"Of course."

"You know she lived on the coast in Tillamook and had a huge garden? Well, she'd go out in her garden every morning, wearing a housedress, an apron, high-top black Converse All-Stars, and a sombrero, and she'd pick up the slugs and fling them into her incinerator."

"No way!"

"I'm serious. And she was the sweetest woman who ever lived. Something about slugs brought out the beast in her."

I hung up and contemplated sweet, gentle Julia Zumstein in her sombrero. Too bad we didn't have an incinerator.

So far, I'd consulted two reference books, a stack of magazines, and two real live people, and I still didn't have an acceptable way to deal with my slug problem. Poisons were out; drowning seemed cruel; salting seemed even crueler. Salted slugs literally dehydrate to death, and with a slug's multitude of nerve endings, salting makes for a particularly painful death.

What was left? All the time-consuming, up-close-and-personal methods I'd hoped to avoid: Picking slugs out of the dirt and putting them in the garbage. Leaving out overturned grapefruit rinds and capturing the slugs that crawled inside. Putting one board on top of another, inserting a small pebble in between to make enough space for slugs to snuggle up in, then removing the pebble and stomping on the boards (and, indirectly, the slugs). None of these methods appealed to me. I wanted to avoid being directly responsible for the demise of their sluggy souls, and I also didn't want to be funeral director for their slimy corpses.

The next morning, I ventured outside again. More slugs. More nibbles out of plants. My black tulip, which had bloomed just days before, had bite marks on its leaves. I spotted a slug climbing the stem of a healthy hyacinth. Without thinking, I reached down, plucked it off, and hurled it into the street. "Just try to get back here, you rotten slug, you," I muttered, and looked around for another. Ten minutes later, I was still hunting and slinging. A little light had gone on in my brain: If I threw the slugs into the street, I wasn't really causing their deaths, was I? They'd be eaten by a bird, or run over by a car, or dried up by the sun. They'd be dead, all right, but I wouldn't have to actually dance on their bodies or lure them to a fatal beer swim.

Add to this the sheer physical gratification of ripping slugs off my plants and flinging them as hard as I could into the street, and I was convinced I'd found the best way to deal with the pests. It might be time intensive, but it was intensely satisfying. I finally headed inside, flushed with victory.

"What are you doing?" Kevin asked curiously as I stood at the sink, washing and washing and washing my hands.

I grimaced. "Trying to get the slug slime off."

"Oh." There was a brief silence, then, "And why are you covered with slug slime?"

"Because I've been tossing slugs into the street."

"Okay." Another pause. "And why were you slug tossing?"

I explained my thoughts on slug removal. Always ready for a debate about ethics and philosophy, Kevin jumped right in.

"So you're removing them from their natural habitat and tossing them into the street, but you think you're not really killing them?"

That's not very logical, Wegler. You're responsible for their deaths, even if you don't actually do the killing yourself."

"That's not true," I protested, finally giving up on the soap and water. I reached for a hand towel, rubbed off the remaining slime, and tossed the towel down the laundry chute. "They're going to be eaten by a bird or squashed by a car. I'm not doing it."

"But the bird or car wouldn't get them if you didn't first toss them into the street," he said stubbornly. "You're just as guilty of killing those slugs as if you poisoned them." He looked at his watch. "Gotta go. By the way, next time you're covered with slug slime, just rub your hands together. It rolls up like glue and you can just peel it off. Slug slime absorbs water. That's why it's so hard to wash off."

"Really? Where'd you learn that?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember. Just one of those things you learn when you grow up here."

"Hey, you mean you knew that all this time and yet you watched me washing my hands for five minutes?"

"You make a good Lady Macbeth," he said as he picked up his briefcase.

"I'll feed you slugs for dinner if you're not careful," I yelled at his back as he went out the front door.



Slugs for dinner isn't such a crazy idea. After all, there's a thin line between slug and snail. More accurately, there's a thin shell between the two creatures. For many people, that shell is enough to justify

reating the slug's cousin as a culinary delight. The rest of us see the snail for what it is: a slug in drag.

I ate my first and last snails while visiting Quebec City as a freshman in high school. Everything about those snails is permanently burned into my memory: The little clay pot they arrived in, the tiny-tined, long-handled fork I used to pry them from their shells, the candle burning under the melted butter. And then the snails themselves: Small. Wild tasting. Chewy. Make that *very* chewy. This was gourmet dining? As I chomped and swallowed and tried to look nonchalant, I realized for the first time that enough garlic and melted butter can make anything palatable, even fashionable.

Now, after waging a long campaign of war against the snail's cousin, I know I'll never eat another snail. The vision of 27,000 teeth, green blood, and that all-encompassing coat of slime would be ever before me as I coaxed snail bodies from their shells.

Not even butter and garlic can disguise some things.