



Wildlife Gardening: problem wildlife

Wildlife gardeners tend to aim for a harmonious balance of plants and animals which fluctuates through the years, but does not allow one animal or plant to dominate at the expense of others (this is really biodiversity). Problem wildlife will vary from area to area. If you live in the centre of town you could develop a large snail population before any ground beetles, toads or other predators are able to move in!

As soon as you suspect you have a problem with an animal in your garden:

Step 1 - Establish what it is

- Little black insects on your plants might be newly hatched ladybird larvae, big white grubs among wood chips could be rare stag beetle larvae
- Ask a gardening friend, or visit a local ecology centre, taking a sample with you

Step 2 - Establish whether your animal is causing any damage.

- Establish which commercial controls are available, and whether they are likely to have any wider effects. These might include barriers, ultra-sound deterrents, parasitic nematodes, or traps.

Step 3 - Make your choice about what to do:

You might decide some or all of the following:

- to do nothing, or even to encourage the animal
- to encourage predators like toads and ladybirds
- to use a commercial barrier
- to use a trap, or to hand pick the animal
- to use a nematode, or other destroyer

Pesticides are substances designed to poison a living organism. It is not a good idea to reach for them as soon as you suspect a problem, because you will be spreading a poison within your garden. Pesticides are herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, nematicides, and rodenticides.

For more information on pesticides and alternative strategies contact the Pesticides Action Network - www.pan-uk.org or on 020 7065 0905

The following organisations offer to recognise and advise on unknown invertebrates. Usually you need to be a member to use this service, and should provide them with the beastie or a good photo, and information on where you found it - phone descriptions are always a little hard to work with.

Natural History Museum 020 7942 5000

Henry Doubleday Research Association, Garden Organic 0247 630 3517

Foxes

Foxes are very popular animals and an urban success story - nothing beats an early morning site of fox cubs playing on the lawn. They can be rather untidy animals, and will dig for worms, and eat fruit and buds. If you mind this and don't want too much fox attention in your garden:

- Cover any bare soil with chicken wire or mesh pegged down.
- Bring indoors anything that you would mind foxes playing with - like children's toys.
- Use a commercial repellent like Renardine, or an ultra-sonic repellent.
- Block up any gaps under sheds or steps that might be used for an earth between October and January - either making sure that there are no foxes inside, or using a one-way hinge to allow them out but not back in.

Squirrels

Squirrels are fun, and they can be deterred from bird feeders by mixing chilli powder or 'squirrel away' in with the food, or you can make a squirrel proof feeder as a challenge. They are often hungry in springtime if they dig up crocuses, try planting colchicums or daffodils instead.



For copies of Islington's guidance notes on foxes or squirrels contact Islington Ecology Centre on 020 7354 5162

Slugs and Snails

Slugs and snails are eaten by hedgehogs, frogs, toads, slow worms, lizards, ground beetles, and various birds. Small slugs are also eaten by harvestmen and centipedes. Encouraging these predators into your garden will reduce the number of slugs and snails.

If you use slug pellets, or other molluscicides, you face a very high risk of poisoning the helpful animals when they eat a recently poisoned slug or snail. Slug pellets can also poison food plants if laid next to them, and should not be used where children or pets might eat them. All round nasty things, please do not use them.

What can you do?

These are some ideas that will help with the problem. The list is in descending order of severity, so start at the top

- Work for a balanced wildlife garden with enough predators to deal with the problems
- Try growing plants that slugs do not like. Examples include – plants with furry leaves like Elephants Ears, plants with tough leaves like Red Valerian, spiny plants, grasses, and herbs with strong scents like rosemary. Some of these may actively discourage slugs and snails
- Surround vulnerable plants with gravel, broken eggshells, wood ash or a commercial irritant barrier, or try copper strips which give a slight electric shock
- Grow drought-hardy plants in free-draining soil, and water in the morning, rather than the evening – slugs prefer moist conditions.
- Protect young seedlings in a greenhouse or coldframe – but make sure compost and pots are completely clean before bringing them into this environment
- Put a barrier of Vaseline around the lip of large containers, or even around the stem of tall plants like sunflowers

Last resorts - ways to remove or kill organically

- Collect ground-living slugs in slightly buried upturned grapefruit halves
- Leave a few lettuce leaves around your border to tempt slugs and snails in, then remove the leaves
- Place saucers of beer at ground level to tempt them in and drown them – or purchase a 'slug pub', which does not evaporate so fast
- Hand-picking is often the most effective method of finding the slugs and snails that eat your plants, best carried out two hours after dark. You will need to continue collecting as, believe it or not, young slugs and snails grow faster in the absence of adults, and new ones will come...

In a London garden, you may find fifteen different slugs and snails. Some only eat rotting plants, others will reach for the freshest, tenderest leaves. A few are rather rare.

There are over 200 species of slugs and snails in Britain, many of which are beautiful, rare and threatened. The great grey slug is twelve inches long, the tiny Desmoulin's whorl snail held up the Newbury Bypass with its rarity, and the Roman snail is huge and was originally brought here for eating. If you live near a woodland, grassland, or river you may see some of these beautiful and non-threatening slugs and snails in your garden.



In partnership with



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