

CUTWORMS AND SLUGS

Cutworms

Cutworms are the soft, fat larvae of a large family of dull colored, medium sized moths. Cutworms are classified by their method of feeding, whether underground, at the surface or above the ground. The most damaging cutworms feed on tomatoes, the cabbage family, melon family, asparagus and other vegetables. Many cut off tender, young plants or shoots at the soil surface. Cutworms feed mainly at night. During the day, they rest in the soil, coiled into a ball.

Protect young plants from cutworms for the first 2-3 weeks while their stems are still very tender. After 3 weeks or so, the stems become somewhat hard and woody as the plants mature, and cutworms no longer bother them.

Non-chemical controls are quite effective. They include:

Mowing up to the edge of the garden so cutworms have less to feed on surrounding the garden.

- ✓ Keep a 3 or 4 foot strip of dry soil with no plants around the entire perimeter so the garden is unattractive to enter.

Plant sunflowers as a trap crop around the perimeter and hunt and kill cutworms daily. This is a favored food. But the “seek and destroy” mission must be regular or the cutworms will increase in number because they are being fed.

- ✓ Surround tender transplant stems with collars of folded newspaper, cardboard strips or aluminum foil. The collars should be 2 to 3 inches tall and pushed firmly into the soil or the cutworm can't go over or under.

Cutworms cannot curl around those stems. Paper collars can stay in place until they break down. The foil should then be removed.

- ✓ Avoid the use of organic mulch down the aisle ways because it gives cutworms hiding places. Instead, use a method called “dust mulching.”

Till or hoe about 1 inch deep so the surface dries out and is fluffy, but what is below stays damp. Cutworms do not like crawling in dry soil.

Water early in the day and loosen soil shortly thereafter so the soil surface is dry by evening or cutworm dinnertime.

Slugs

Slugs are soft-bodied creatures that are gray or mottled in coloring and can grow up to 4 inches long. Slugs look like snails without shells. Most slugs feed on decaying plant matter and molds, although they will eat the foliage of many plants, doing considerable damage. They prefer darkness and moist environments, so they do most of their feeding at night. If you think slugs may be a problem, look for slimy trails left on plant leaves and sidewalks. When the trail dries out it looks like someone put a light trail of shiny material down.

There are several non-chemical controls for slugs. During the day, slugs like to hide near the soil under debris. Looking under these hiding places once a day and killing any slugs you find is a good method of control. Alternatively, you can eliminate these hiding places altogether. Sinking jar lids down to their rim in garden soils and filling them with beer will attract slugs, causing them to drown in the beer.

In wet years, you may need to remove organic mulches from the garden as these encourage slugs. Perennials and other plantings may be thinned to encourage better air circulation and quicker drying.

Although not always effective, chemicals such as slug baits may be used where the problem is severe. They should be applied early in the season. Read the label carefully, as many slug pesticides are not labeled for use in food crops.

Ref: Master Gardener Training Manual, Small Fruits, P. 8-9; MSU Extension, Slugs are Making Tracks in my Garden; MSU Extension, Cutworms in the Garden

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