

GASTROPODS

Apparently snails have a homing instinct. So those of us who are a little squeamish about dispatching these garden pests and lob them over the fence instead are likely to find the snails return. Similarly those on allotments who throw them as far as they can are unlikely to lob them 65 feet, which has been found to be the range at which the snail's homing powers run out. Now, with allotments being about 40 feet wide, this means that to be sure of the little blighters not returning you have to throw them not to the next allotment, nor to the one after that, but to the allotment after that. However, neighbouring allotment holders, when you are not there, could lob them back onto your allotment so a trick is called-for. To find out who is returning snails onto your allotment, put a tiny drop of quick-drying paint onto the Gastropod's shell, green for ones you lob to the left and red for ones you lob to the right. That way, you will be able to keep tabs on which of your neighbours is "at it". It would be useful, for snails which are returned by your neighbours, to paint a second mark before throwing it again, then a third mark for a third outbound journey. The reason is that after six solo flights the snail qualifies for its wings and a Private Pilot's Licence.

How does one address a Gastropod snail? One cannot use Mr, Mrs or Ms, nor Monsieur, Madame or Mademoiselle since they are hermaphrodites, having both male and female reproductive organs. This gives them a deep complex and makes them shy in company. They need another snail to reproduce, but as I have never seen them in the act I cannot tell you how they do it. I do know that they hibernate and that is one of the best times to bash them since they are unlikely to sprint away.

Gastropod snails are not the only small creatures with homing instincts of course. Frogs have an irresistible urge to spawn in the pond they were born in. The house at the back of my allotment had a pond into which a frog, many years ago, exuded a mass of frogspawn. Thereafter, in spring, the frog babies returned, but by this time they were fully-grown measuring about 3 inches head to tail. They literally filled the pond and my neighbour scooped them out with a net into dustbins and transported them a few miles away to release them – but they still came back. One year I persuaded him to let me have the dustbins full of frogs to let loose in my garden, since they consume Gastropod slugs. I had three dustbinfulls and tipped them over together on the lawn at the back of my house. I was amazed that they all shot off in the same direction – the direction of "their" pond. I had a rickety fence in their way at the time; they found holes in it and continued on their trek. My immediate neighbour, all unsuspecting, was very surprised to see an army of large frogs crossing the lawn in the direction of his house – there were hundreds. A story to dine out on!

I have not lobbed snails from my garden or from my allotment. Any I found were caressed by trowel, boot or spade. I now have few snails, but I do have many, many Gastropod slugs of all sizes and colours. There are giant red ones 4 inches long, giant black ones and giant newcomers which are mottled green and brown. A giant measuring 6 inches was recently discovered careering across the lawn; it became two 3 inch slugs. The giant slugs are the ones I find on the surface but there are many down below. Apparently there are 60 slugs per square foot in England and I probably have more since my soil is clay loam on top of clay, a slug's paradise. In addition, I have over the years applied masses of farmyard manure and created a sheer heaven for slugs. I have not knowingly eaten slugs. I have eaten lots of snails but that was after the specialists had put the snails onto a diet of lettuce for a month to cleanse them (snails are not toxic to humans but some of what they eat is, so they have to get rid of that before we eat them). I have also eaten various other Gastropods such as whelks, limpets and winkles. I do not see why we should not eat slugs after they have been cleansed for a month on a diet of lettuce. The avant-garde chefs could have a field-day. Slug Porridge, Slug in the Hole, Limace à la Grecque, Limace Flambée avec Grand Marnier – the possibilities for new culinary sensations would be endless. And that would reduce the population of slugs.

But..... how can we deal with the slug menace if we cannot eat them? I have a policy of death on sight, usually despatching them with a spade. However, I do not see many since they are nocturnal. I do have an LED (light-emitting diode) light which I could strap to my forehead so that the light points in the direction I am looking. However, I am most reluctant to go out on my allotment late at night

with my LED light strapped to my forehead. Sure as eggs, some neighbour would ring the police who would be round in a flash to deal with a report that someone was behaving suspiciously on the allotments. This has become much more likely since the following large red notice has appeared affixed to the gate of my allotments: "Warning. Thames Valley Police. COUNTRY WATCH. Anything Suspicious call Thames Valley Police 101 or dial 999 in an emergency. Working together for safer rural communities."

Imagine the scene. Up comes PC Plod "Hello, Hello, Hello! What have we here?" I turn to face the officer, blinding him with my LED light. "I'm killing Gastropods officer." "Likely story" says PC Plod, staggering and unable to see. I turn to Plod, blinding him again. "But it's true officer, this is my allotment and I've killed 20 of them with my spade so far." "OK" says Plod, "show me your allotment tenancy agreement and either your passport or photo driving licence". Again I turn to Plod, blinding him again, "I don't have them with me officer". "OK," says Plod, thoroughly annoyed by now with being blinded and unable to see my dead Gastropods. "You will have to accompany me to the Station and explain to the Sergeant that you were killing Gastropods." The sergeant believes that Gastropods are legitimate immigrants and are the inhabitants of Gastropodya, a country in the Balkans which recently joined the European Union along with Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Transylvania, Macedonia and Montenegro. He charges me with murder and with horror I realise that the newspapers will soon be full of the story of the serial killer of Gastropods. I tell the sergeant that it is all a ghastly mistake but nevertheless he puts me in a cell for the rest of the night. The next morning the police station is besieged by an army of press photographers and journalists eager to get a sight of the mass murderer of Naphill. I am released on bail and protest to the journalists that I am innocent but they do not listen - they want their story and lurid headlines is what they seek. I explain that there is no such country as Gastropodya but the journalists also believe it is a country in the Balkans which recently joined the European Union along with Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Transylvania, Macedonia and Montenegro and that I have been exterminating hapless citizens of that country who just happened to be on my allotment in the darkness minding their own business. My wife finds it all amusing and buys copies of all the newspapers next day to keep as souvenirs. Events then take a more serious tone as the magistrates sentence me to 3 months in jail with no parole, which is the standard tariff for serial killers. That could be serious since I would not be able to weed my allotment for three months which would be disastrous. Fortunately, I am sentenced to an open prison nearby and I abscond daily to weed and return before my absences are discovered. My head is spinning, I feel I am hallucinating, and try to wake up.

After a dream like that I felt that going onto my allotment late at night with an LED light strapped to my forehead would be a very risky thing to do. So how to deal with the slug menace? I have to confess that I, an organic gardener, have resorted to slug pellets on my allotment since 1973 when sowing seeds. To protect birds which might eat dead Gastropods, I usually cover the seed bed with fleece or fine-mesh netting. It is when seeds are germinating, or when plants are very small, that they are most at risk from slugs. Once the plants are reasonably big slugs should not damage them.

Happy gardening,

MIKE MASON