



I can't grow hostas, I've tried but they just get eaten!

We thought, why not have an issue of our newsletter devoted to the phrase we hear most often at shows up and down the country. We know that not all visitors to garden shows are gardeners, and that they probably mutter something similar about roses and fuchsias whilst meandering aimlessly past the beautiful exhibits on display, but it can be so maddening...

Hostas and pests - volume 3

As the title suggests we have already visited this subject twice already in our newsletters:



- **What to do about slugs and snails:** introducing our 'St. Valentine's Day Massacre' characters - [February 2007](#)
- **Over wintering your hostas** - [October 2007](#)

We suspect, as a reader of this newsletter, you are in the 'real gardener' category so we don't need to preach to the converted, but why do people get so defeatist about pest and disease problems? Weeds are only plants growing in the wrong place so we are happy to remove them - why can't pests be treated in the same way? We encountered one very argumentative lady at a show a couple of years ago, who would insist that she couldn't grow hostas. We thought it was worth sharing her strange conclusion, because we found it so funny.

So what do we do about pests?

We adopt the same principles with our pest control as with the rest of our business - we keep an open mind and experiment, trying different approaches in the hope that we can find the right combination, that will do the trick.

In gardening, spotting the first indications of pest damage is critical to successful treatment, but in many cases you need to ensure you start combating some pests before any damage becomes evident. As slug damage occurs when the shoots first emerge, it is really important to begin your annual treatment programme as soon as the weather begins to warm up - hence the idea of a 'St. Valentine's Day Massacre'.

Slug pellets

We have been using Ferramol slug pellets for the past 3 years.

Although they are effective we feel that metaldehyde-based pellets are probably better and we have not experienced any detrimental effects on our wildlife when using either type of pellet. The key is to follow the manufacturer's instructions.

In general we don't suffer too much of a slug problem as we are constantly moving our plants about and squishing the culprits that escape the pellets. Pellets need to be re-applied about once a month but very sparingly to avoid attracting a larger population into your garden. We use Growing Success products - [check out their website](#)

An exhibitor's perspective

This was a genuine exchange between Yvonne (Y) and a show visitor (SV) a couple of years ago:

SV: "I can't grow hostas"

Y: "Why on earth not, they're bomb-proof - are you letting them dry out?"

SV: "No, they get eaten. Every year they come up beautifully but then get eaten to death."

Y: "Well the fact that they come up every year proves you can grow hostas. What you need to do is protect them from damage as much as possible. But don't expect miracles - no plant is completely safe from pests."

SV: "I hate slugs and snails"

Y: "OK, how much do you hate them?"

SV: "I go out at night and pick them off the plants and crush them under foot"

Y: "Excellent, so why not use slug pellets and get your life back?"

Snails are the worst culprits as they thrive in the same environment that hostas love: cool and shady. Seek them out at the bottom of walls and hedges and around the base of your containers. Snails can travel the length of a cricket pitch in a single night for a good feed, so just chucking them into a neighbouring garden or field won't get rid of the problem. One customer told us she had tried to prove this by collecting a handful of snails, painting red nail varnish on their shells and chucking them on a local playing field. Sure enough later that week she found one back in her garden. So you need to take action and we find pellets the most effective option for our scale of operation.



We do undertake several cleaning operations throughout the year and manually remove slugs and snails. We need to do this to keep our plants looking in tip-top condition but also because vine weevil can take over very quickly unless you maintain a constant look-out. Vine weevil is a really annoying pest as it lays its eggs in soil and the larvae tend to bury themselves round the roots of the plant until they turn into the adult form. The larvae feed on the roots of the plant and the adults feed on the leaves and stems of the plants. The RHS website has some useful information about [vine weevil](#), among other garden pests. The site also has an interesting poll on the [top ten garden pests in 2007](#) - it is interesting to see that vine weevil was at number 3 for 2006 and 2007 but it is not something we ever hear people complaining about.

A recent introduction to our pest control programme is an organic mulch top dressing from Fine Naturals Ltd:

The redbush mulch is quite coarse to the touch and contains trace elements so both attributes act as a deterrent to slugs and snails. It looks and smells nicer than many top dressings and could be a winner in your garden. Why not give it a go, for more information contact [Fine Naturals Ltd](#)



Redbush mulch
We are helping a new company trial their product on our plants. Redbush mulch is a by-product of the tea manufacturing process, so it is a great way of recycling what, to the tea industry, is a waste product.

PSST... after many enquiries, here is the garlic wash recipe recommended by the BHHS:

1. Crush 2 large garlic bulbs
2. Add to 2 pints of water and boil for 3 minutes until blanched
3. Cool and strain
4. Use 1 tablespoon per gallon of water in a can with a rose
5. Pour over leaves in late afternoon. Repeat this every 14 days from when the shoots first appear. *Use slug pellets until the leaves are up.*

Next month: We look forward to 2009 and the plants to look out for...

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 30 years of experience with the Hosta genus. We are constantly learning and refining that knowledge and would welcome any suggestions that readers of this newsletter would like to make so please [contact us](#).

SV: "Oh, I couldn't, I would kill all the wildlife. My neighbour found a frog with blue foam round its mouth because it had eaten a slug."

Y: "Fancy a slug turning the frog's saliva blue - I have never heard of that before."

SV: (clearly warming to the subject): "Yes, and that wasn't all, she also found a hedgehog that had eaten a single pellet and died."

Y: "Gosh, are you sure your neighbour isn't pulling your leg?"

SV: "Why would she, she had already lost a donkey to slug pellets. If a single pellet can kill a hedgehog then I can't use them - so I can't grow hostas."

QED

Although we laugh about this, it can be extremely annoying because it shows a lack of interest in actually finding ways to combat pests. Real gardeners know that all plant species suffer from pest problems and that, with some effort, most can be controlled. Perseverance and a willingness to prevent pest problems getting the upper hand will reap rewards, so **Good luck!**