

Garden Techniques - Dealing With Pests

There are many birds, animals and insects which are a joy to the gardener both in their beauty and in the help they give us in the garden. But there are also many which are pests and which can ruin a beautiful garden. Life would be a great deal simpler if we could just wave a magic wand and get rid of the ones we don't want, but it's not that simple. To begin with - we have to identify them. One of the best methods of keeping pests down is good garden hygiene. Keeping your garden clear of rubbish will reduce the trouble spots where pests can breed and take hold. It's a very simple remedy, but one of the most effective, particularly against slugs.

There are some creatures that really help keep pests down, the common earthworm is a powerful ally in his constant wanderings through the soil which keeps it open to air and water. A lot of our common garden birds feed on garden pests. Many insects feed on their harmful relatives. Toads and Frogs can demolish a huge number of insects in one meal and are a joy to have in the garden. Making your garden attractive to birds and toads is one of the best pest control methods. A good bird table or nest box, food spread about in spring, and some water are invitations for birds to stick around in your garden. If you want Toads and Frogs, make sure there is some damp shade. A few reasonably sized stones in the shade of a shrub with maybe some damp leaves would be a luxury residence for a toad. At night they will venture out to catch their food - which they prefer live.

Slugs are a particular bane of my life - they come out and munch on all your tender plants if given half a chance. Again the birds will help, and you can use safe slug pellets which do not harm birds or hedgehogs. There are all kinds of mulches and even slug fences that you can get, the worst damage is often done by the ones you can't see which lurk under the ground. If you want to use a biological control you can get Nematodes from specialist suppliers which inhabit the soil and prey on the slugs. It is a more lengthy process than using some of the chemicals but much kinder to your garden.

Munching Insects with heavy jaws are particularly destructive and can rip through a vegetable patch in no time at all - I lost no end of cabbages and sprouts last year to caterpillars. This year I am working hard at encouraging the birds to counteract this. You can use sprays but do make sure that they are bird and fish friendly if you have a pond. This type of insect is killed by taking the spray into its body as it nibbles on your plants. Vegetables are particularly susceptible to pests - they like to eat them just as much as we do, and many of our crops have their own particular pests which only feed on one plant. Tomato Worms for example which burrow into the young fruit and eat it from the inside out. You can often harvest a particularly luscious looking crop of potatoes only to find the tubers inhabited by yellow and black striped potato bugs. My particular hate is the small green caterpillar which ravages cabbages, broccoli and cauliflower. Liberal applications of soapy water from a spray gun are quite effective in getting rid of that particular nuisance.

There are some pests where the only defence is to get rid of badly infested plant before it spreads. The plant needs to be destroyed or removed completely from the garden. A couple of years ago it caused me great distress to have to take all the Lilies out of my garden. I had a large pot which was full of the most beautiful white lilies - until I spotted the dreaded Scarlet Lily Beetle. They are a beautiful shade of red but utterly destructive and will destroy every lily in their path. I will replant after another year or so and hope that no larvae have survived.

Sucking insects such as greenfly and lice almost glue themselves onto the host plant as they need to be able to feed by constant sucking. They are unbelievably destructive for their size and as they breed rapidly even a large plant can soon be infested. Again soapy water sprayed liberally can help, and I have had some success with a vinegar and water mix (about half and half) but not on young plants! Be careful if you use the soapy water not to spray over any water in your garden or you will potentially damage the pond life - frogs and toads in particular. If you encourage Ladybirds in your garden they can control the greenfly fairly effectively as well.

My personal preference is for natural controls without the use of chemicals but in order for this to work you do have to accept that for a couple of years or so, until the natural balance asserts itself, you will lose some crops and precious plants. The best weapon you have during that time is constant vigilance, removal of infected plants and determination. If you give in and start to use chemical sprays you will have to start the whole process again as many chemicals are indiscriminate in doing their work. There are some sprays which comply with organic principles and of course, you can buy biological controls in the form of beneficial insects and bacteria. Which ever method you choose, you will never completely remove pests from your garden - but you should be able to keep their damage to a minimum.

About the Author

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