

The problem of snails in a suburban garden

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Running Head THE PROBLEM OF SNAILS The Problem of Snails in a Suburban Garden The Problem of Snails in a Suburban Garden

When I started my organic garden in the suburb, it was a barren wilderness.

Water

being scarce, the ground had been baked hard by the relentless sun. The first thing I did was to

plant some shade trees. Then I dug a shallow pit for compost. I put all the kitchen and garden waste in the pit and covered it with soil, turning it occasionally.

In three years, the garden had become green and luscious. Birds like the robin, the hummingbird

the barbet , and the crow pheasant were constant visitors to the garden besides the honey bees,

and chipmunks. The permanent residents - the frogs, sunbirds and lizards lived in

harmony with each other until the aliens came.

Nobody recognized the future threat to our ecology when we first saw those pretty, cream

striped chocolate shells moving slowly in the cool parts of the garden. These Giant African

Snails or GAS had been introduced into our environment through someone's carelessness.

At first they did what snails are supposed to do- eat rotting leaves. Quite soon they found that

the fresh green leaves of the lily and the cabbage taste better than rotting leaves. Even when we

saw our lily leaves full of holes , we did not recognize the looming catastrophe. Soon the lilies

and most of the vegetable plants had vanished from the neighborhood gardens. When the snails

started attacking the fruit trees , we woke up to the reality. Then the matter became worse- the

snails started breeding in thousands. Our local birds did not seem to fancy

the snails- perhaps

because they were too fastidious..

Having no natural predator, and being able to eat anything, the population of the GAS

increased tremendously in our suburb. Whenever I went for an evening walk, I could

commonly see snails crossing the roads, scaling the walls or climbing trees. The roads were full

of squashed snails which had come under automobile wheels. And how they ate! After they ate

through the dahlias and daisies , they started on the tomatoes and the lettuce. In no time at all the

neighborhood gardens were in shambles. Our garden paths were criss crossed with shiny snail

slime. Experts in camouflage, they disappeared in the morning.

Achatina Fulika, the Giant African Snail (GAS) is a land snail which is much

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bigger than the

native snail. It has a conical chocolate shell with cream stripes. It can be as big as a man's fist

and is a voracious eater. It hides in cool, dark places and crevices during the day and is very

active during the night. Being a hermaphrodite, it reproduces rapidly. The eggs are translucent

cream balls , laid under compost heaps or fallen leaves. The Department of Primary Industries

and Fisheries of Queensland, Australia describes them as" difficult to eradicate", Snail collection

and baiting is recommended as the most effective control measure.

At the emergency meeting of the Residents' Association , we decided to tackle the snail

menace on a war footing. The civic body sprayed chemical pesticides on all the infested places,

overcoming the protests of the local organic gardeners, but to no avail. We set fire to our

compost heaps hoping that breeding pests would be destroyed, but the critters hid elsewhere.

Who said snails are slow

Although a small percentage of the pests was killed, the rest continued to haunt our gardens. I

hunted them by night. My method was simple- whenever I saw a snail I would drop a big stone

on it and listen for the satisfying crunch. The elimination level was around 1%, and this method

had its obvious drawbacks in our snake friendly environment. Some of my friends tried the

herbal route to elimination of the pests and failed . Spraying eucalyptus extracts , and ringing

the plants with copper wire did not help either. Pouring salt over them killed the plants too.

It was the boys of our suburb who came up with a 'Final Solution' They suggested to us

that they would find the snails and destroy them for a consideration. Every afternoon

the boys would hunt in the nooks and crannies of our gardens and catch the creatures and dunk

them in buckets of detergent solution. Finally, the infestation seemed to be under control.

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But our relief was short lived.. There was another outbreak of GAS next month.

Collection and dunking of snails became our common evening entertainment. My

friend Ram Hegde in India advised me to try a bio-pesticide made by mixing yoghurt and neem

powder. This seemed to work although slowly. Soon, the snails started disappearing. Shiny snail

trails became a thing of the past.

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I realized that the birds had started eating the snails. The crow pheasant especially seemed to

enjoy a meal of escargots. Empty snail shells began to appear everywhere. Soon the Giant

African Snails disappeared from our neighborhood, leaving the environment permanently

altered. They have not appeared since.

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Works cited

" Exotic plant pests-Giant African snail". Queensland Governament .

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Industries and Fisheries. Last reviewed 28 April 2005