

# A window seat for slimes of passion



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**A**t first glance, it looked like a giant leaf. Maybe that was because I had just woken and my eyes weren't fully open. It clung to the screen outside the sliding glass door of my bedroom.

I took a closer look and . . . well, before I go any further, I should issue a warning:

The following is s-rated, intended for mature gardeners able to deal with earthy matters concerning slime, sex and — ugh, feh and yuck! — slugs.

To return to the narrative, the leaf was animate, consisting of two of the gastropods known as slugs. I'm no slugologist but I'm pretty sure they were great gray slugs as opposed to, say, banana slugs or red slugs. They were huge with dark spots running like stripes along their gray-brown bodies.

As I stared at them, I remembered a passage by one of my favorite garden writers, Celia Thaxter, who wrote: "It seems to me the worst of all the plagues is the slug, the snail without a shell. He is beyond description, repulsive, a mass of



PHOTO BY IRENE VIRAG

**Great gray slugs mate on a screen door, oblivious to the malevolence they inspire.**

sooty, shapeless slime, and he devours everything." The slug does just that — munching at will with tiny tooth-like protrusions on its tongue called radula. It even eats other slugs — when they're dead.

The only mistake Celia made was referring to the slug as "he," which I'll explain shortly. At first the slime buckets on my screen stretched side by side, then they gradually curled together, one above the other. By the time I woke my husband up, they had entwined themselves around each other while they dangled from a thin string

that looked like, and was, mucus. If you're a slug, mucus is very important; it keeps you from drying out, allows you to wriggle safely over sharp objects, offers protection against predators who have difficulty dealing with it, and helps species like great gray slugs from sliding down vertical surfaces.

My husband, who has an instinct for these things, did a double-take. "They're getting it on," he said, except he was a little less delicate. I had suspected as much but didn't want to think about slugs in love. Or even in lust. I don't say this out of prudery, but because I don't want to feel any tender mercies about these all-consuming plant-eaters.

Anyway, there they were, twisting and dangling. Now — and don't say I didn't warn you — things got a little kinky. Slugs are hermaphrodites, they have both male and female reproductive organs. And spurred by scientific curiosity, my husband and I watched as the mating pair extruded their genitalia, wrapped them around one another, and exchanged sperm in a bluish cloud.

Soon they retracted everything and hung from the thinning cord. I have since learned that some slugs take part in a practice called apophallation, in

which one does a Loreena Bobbit on the other, thus forcing it to remain totally female for the rest of its days. And yes, some slugs can fertilize themselves.

Any gardener who gets down in the dirt is privy to the intimate details of pistils and stamens, of pollination and reproduction. As well as the goings-on of feathered and four-footed creatures. Amorous squirrels chase each other up and down trees and along fences throughout the spring, birds nest and rabbits carry on like, well, rabbits. As long-time readers know, swans have mated against my glass front door and snapping turtles have laid eggs in my yard.

But nothing could have prepared me for great gray slugs engaged on my bedroom screen.

As their slimy cord stretched, my tale became something of a morality play. Pretty soon, they would fall, push off and produce eggs — hundreds of them. My husband and I often carry spiders and crickets out of the house and are currently refraining from cutting the grass around a colony of ground-nesting bees. When safeguards fail, we share our lettuce with rabbits and our squash with squirrels. Our garden as well as our lawn is organic.

But when it comes to slugs,

there is a consideration that is both personal and cosmic. Would we turn hundreds of slugs loose upon our yard and the world? You bet your sweet patootie we wouldn't. I've corresponded and talked to people who dispatch slugs with knives, scissors, homemade spears, sharp spades, ammonia, salt, vinegar and beer. Or who trap them and throw them into the middle of the road and let motorists do the rest. I even read about someone who stabs slugs with a screwdriver. And a fellow who came to install central air-conditioning recently told us about a friend who swallowed a slug to win a \$50 bet.

We did nothing like that. We gave the slugs a choice. We put a bowl of beer beneath them. They didn't *have* to fall into it. If they had any sense, they'd swing left or right and miss it.

Most gardeners would agree that my story has a happy ending. They fell right in.

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