**Weekly Express-News Article**

**By Calvin R. Finch, PhD, SAWS Director, and Horticulturist**

Saturday, June 9, 2012

**“Fire Ant and Slug Control”**

Every gardener has had unpleasant run-ins with fire ants, and slugs, snails, and pill bugs cause part of the damage blamed on caterpillars and beetles. Both sets of pests require special attention for control.

The basic fire ant control plan offered by Texas AgriLife Extension is described as the “Two Step Method.” It uses a bait like Amdro for distribution across your landscape, low levels and an insecticide such as acephate applied to ant hills that are in the vicinity of your activities.

The Amdro works over two or three weeks to kill most of the hills in the area of its application and even surrounding areas. The acephate kills hills within hours of its application. Fire ants that walk through it or come in contact through other means die almost immediately.

The disruption by acephate is so noticeable that some hills pack up and leave before all the insects are killed in the hill. The good news is that they will move to form a new colony and should be eventually affected by the Amdro bait.

The “Two Step Method” works very well for several months of control until new colonies move in from untreated areas surrounding your property. For summer wide control, expand the “Two Step Method” treatment to your entire neighborhood. If application of the bait is coordinated across a large land area like a neighborhood, it is very effective at destroying the fire ant hills in your yard plus those in the surrounding area that would re-colonize your landscape.

To address fire ant issues on a smaller scale such as in your vegetable garden, consider the following tactics. Acephate and Amdro are not labeled for use in a vegetable garden but the organic control spinosad is. Use the formulation labeled as “Concern” and other products.

Products with pyrethrins, another organic insecticide, also work. Pyrethrin is often mixed with diatomaceous earth, but in such a product all the killing power resides in the pyrethrin, the diatomaceous earth is claimed to have some ability to scrape the exoskeleton of soft insects such as aphids but does not seem to affect hard-bodied insects such as fire ants.

If you grow okra, it is likely that fire ants will be attracted to the planting. They “farm” the aphids on okra and will also consume the flowers and developing fruit. For a quick control to enable you to harvest the okra, spray-off the fire ants with a spray of water.

Slugs and snails eat plant material. They are especially fond of primulas, strawberries, pansies, begonias, daylilies, and other plants that grow close to the ground. Recognize their damage as eaten areas that begin at the edge of the leaf and move into the center of the plant.

Slugs and snails are most prevalent in areas that are mulched and well watered. They hide in rotting organic material and in cracks and crevices such as those in raised beds.

The easiest way to control slugs and snails is to use a “slug and snail bait.” There are several particle sizes from which to choose. The finer material is less likely to attract the attention of birds or pets but the larger granules last longer. Place the bait as a border around susceptible plants with some of it spread close to likely hiding places. Replenish the bait every two weeks for the fine formulation and every month for the larger granules.

Slug and snail bait will also control pill bugs.

The active ingredient in most slug and snail bait is carbaryl (Sevin) but there are also some organic options available. Review the labels on the several products that are offered at gardening outlets to find the product that is most suited to your garden conditions, willingness to utilize application methods, and sensibilities.

For an unusual organic slug, snail, and pill bug control some gardeners use beer traps. Sink a plastic cup into the ground so that the lip is level with the ground surface. Fill the cup one-half full of beer and the slugs, snails, and pill bugs will dive to their demise into the beer. Where the pests are thick, the traps will fill up within five or six days.

As crazy as beer traps sound, they work very well. Place them on four-foot centers through the bed for good control. The beer can be flat, cheap, light, cool or warm it all seems to work equally well. I won’t mention any names, but some gardeners I know drink as much of the beer as actually ends up in the traps as they construct them.