

# At a Snail's Pace

New homeowner lags when it comes to mollusk control | BY ERIN MIDDLEWOOD

When I bought my first house, a little cottage of a place, I thought the snails there were charming. ■ Their whirled shells made me think of childhood excursions to swim in the creek near my aunt's house, where my sisters and I collected cups of freshwater snails with the intention of keeping them as pets. They dried up, and that was that.

I had fanciful notions about snails as a child. I thought of them carrying their homes on their backs, able to tuck themselves inside all cozy and safe. Their antennae make them look inquisitive and friendly. The spiral of their shells suggests a smile.

Now, here I was, in my very own little house with its very own little yard, and all the little pet snails I could ever want.

I took a trip to the library to find out more about snails after I discovered so many of them in my yard. Most books on the topic were for children.

Just about all of the other books were in the gardening section, with titles that inevitably included the word "pest."

The previous inhabitant of my house was a prolific gardener who left a legacy. Tulip and daffodil bulbs she had buried years before bloomed in spring. A large lilac tree perfumed the yard.

But it didn't take long for the yard to go wild. In the three months the house was vacant before I moved in, spiny weeds reached 5 feet tall. Dandelions and tough grasses squeezed out pansies.

And snails multiplied.

I found some snail and slug poison in the garage, but I couldn't bring myself to use it. I knew I could put out saucers of beer, which dehydrates the snails. But I believed the snails and I could coexist.

Months passed. I paid no attention to the snails. I married, causing the human population of my house to double.

The snail population, meanwhile, grew exponentially. Snails, I learned from the gardening books, are hermaphrodites. Each has both the male and female sexual organs

and can lay up to 100 eggs in a batch.

I had no idea how many snails shared our home until we came home after a movie one dark night. I took only a couple steps toward the door before I heard a crunch. I had stepped on a snail.

I turned on the porch light and saw dozens of snails on the sidewalk. They were slowly pulling themselves toward my small garden patch, a feeble effort that consisted of three tomato plants and some basil.

When I noticed not long thereafter that the basil and tomato leaves had turned into lace, there was no doubt about the culprit. The snails had destroyed my hopes of fresh salsa and pesto.

The truce was off.

With my tomatoes a mess, I wondered if I should harvest the snails instead. I ate escargot in my ninth-grade French class. It tasted mostly of garlic and butter. I briefly considered searching for a recipe and then hunting the snails in my yard.

A friend lent me the book *Slug Tossing and Other Adventures of a Reluctant Gardener*. Portland writer Meg DesCamp described her own battle with those less attractive mollusks, slugs. She adopted the battle strategy of master gardeners: hand-picking slugs and tossing them into the street for the birds to eat.

I decided to try it her way.

One moist night, I slipped outside. Snails covered the porch and clung to my tomato plants. I took a deep breath, grabbed one by the shell and hurled it into the street. I began working both hands, heaving the critters into the street. One and then another. I lost count.

My husband peered out the door.

"You're making a mess," he protested. "Leave them alone." I couldn't stop.

The next morning sad shells littered the road. Cars drove by and crunched them and smeared a slick of mucus.

I felt sick.

So I put out dishes of beer and hoped the snails would enjoy their last hurrah.

And, of course, there was always escargot.

Writer Erin Middlewood and her snails live in Vancouver, Washington.

