

Why I Adore Decollate Snails

By Debra Lee Baldwin

In my garden, I have tiny helpers who protect flowers and tender leaves from harm. I pay them nothing, never see them, and feel amazingly blessed to have them.

Fairies? No, decollate snails.

If you've yet to get decollates, it's probably because you've heard they eat seedlings. I've never seen any evidence of that, but I have seen common garden snails consume not only seedlings, but entire pony packs. Decollates feed on decaying organic matter when they run out of their preferred food (the eggs and young of the brown helix snail), so they're also little composters.

When I first cultivated what seemed to be a half-acre salad bar for brown helix snails, I bought snail bait by the 50-lb. bag (fortunately, my dog never went near it). Now, seven years after introducing decollates, I've saved their cost many times over in bait I haven't bought. And I'm no longer dumping poison onto the soil.

For years, on foggy evenings, my husband, son and I hand-picked helix snails by the bucketful. Perhaps the neighbors, seeing our flashlights, thought someone had lost a contact lens. Day or night, whenever I found a snail, I squashed it or threw it into the street. Once I propelled a large snail through the open window of a pickup truck. Oops.

An editor from a big publication visited. She wore a business suit and heels, and minced gingerly through the garden. I'll never forget the look on her face when I crunched a juicy snail the size of a ping-pong ball beneath my Reeboks. It's a wonder she stayed for lunch.

In 1994, *Sunset* magazine assigned me a Garden Guide item on decollate snails. It was only a couple hundred words, but I researched

the topic thoroughly. I learned that San Diego's main source of decollates was Mary Borevitz of San Marcos, who had bought a handful of the inch-long, conical-shelled snails back in 1984.

"They looked dead when they came in the mail," Mary told me. "I tossed them under a tree in my orange grove and forgot about them."

Evidently the decollates were merely dormant, because it wasn't long before that part of the grove had far fewer helix snails. Soon, Mary's well-fed decollates were so numerous, she started collecting them and selling them via mail order.

I went from being skeptical to wanting decollates desperately. But I had just spread snail bait! Mary told me to wait six weeks for it to dissipate. Then, I bought a plastic cupful of snails that looked like periwinkle seashells (only not as pretty) and tucked them beneath cannas, nasturtiums, aloes and everything else. A hundred snails went fast, and I'm not a patient person, so a week later I blitzed the garden with 500 more.



For a year, I continued to handpick mature helix snails, squashing them and leaving the mess behind for the decollates – the existence of which, by the way, had become a matter of faith. Mary may be able to scoop them by the thousands in her tidy 7-acre orchard, but all I've

found since 1994 is five empty shells. (The reason, Mary says, is that decollates are nocturnal. During the day, to stay moist and cool, they burrow into the ground at the base of bushes.)

The Snail Lady, I'm happy to say, has done well. She counts among her clients the San Diego Zoo, the Wild Animal Park, Legoland and Sea World. The latest news is that she is researching a snail that preys on slugs; it's called "oxychilus." The mental image that name conjures – of a patch of oxalis – certainly is not as much fun as "decollates" – which I envision seducing their prey by wiggling past in low-necked sequined gowns.

A friend who got decollates because I recommended them has, like me, become a decollate evangelist. Laurie Connable introduced them into her one-acre flower garden four years ago. Since Laurie's also a big fan of seeds, obviously seedlings and decollates are compatible.

I've noticed my garden's decollate/helix ratio waxes and wanes, probably because the predators decrease when they run out of prey. Since helix snails easily reintroduce themselves – all they have to do is sprint across the street – it's up to me to plump the decollate population. Every other year or so, usually after spring rains, I buy a couple hundred decollates, and drop them like little paratroopers into the garden.

Incidentally, decollates don't climb, like helix snails do, so decollates tend to stay put in a terraced garden like mine. I do suspect, however, some have migrated into neighboring yards, because I haven't spotted any helix snails within spitting distance.



Decollates, which are native to the Mediterranean (as are helix snails), have been approved by the ecological powers-that-be for release in Southern California, but are not

necessarily "legal" elsewhere. So, Mary's careful where she ships them. She says helix snails may have been imported to California as a food source during the gold rush, by European immigrants. I've also heard helix snails were introduced by some idiot who hoped to make a killing in escargot.

If it has been a long time since I've seen a helix snail, my initial reaction tends to be the same as I had as a child: "What an interesting little creature. Look at it's pretty shell..." But quickly I come to my senses and transform it into chow for what my husband calls "stealth snails" – and what I consider my garden's most valuable guardians.

For more information: Mary's GoodSnails (Mary Borevitz): (760) 744-9233 or mary@goodsnails.com Web site: www.goodsnails.com Ideal coverage: one decollate per square foot. Cost: \$19.50/100 snails; \$80/500 and \$125/1,000.

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