

Killer Snail Lady's shock troops are garden-friendly

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SAN MARCOS – It's a good thing they're on our side. These ruthless snails feed on their enemies' babies, launch ganglike attacks on their prey and can go months without food.

Like professional hit men, these snails will do the dirty work for people.

Right now, for example, they are waging a silent – and very slow – war on the reviled brown garden snail, the omnipresent pests that chew ragged holes in plants and leave their telltale slimy, silvery trails across walkways, walls and windows.

Many of the killer snails, called Decollates, at work in San Diego County's farms and gardens originated here, in Mary Chidester Borevitz's orange grove.

Borevitz owns Mary's Decollate Snails, a mail-order business she runs from home. She also is president of the San Marcos Unified School District board of trustees.

Borevitz, affectionately known as the Killer Snail Lady, is a Decollate expert. She knows their habits, what they like and what they don't.

"They're just wonderful," said Borevitz, who wears earrings made of killer snail shells. "They're my buddies."

Since starting her business 10 years ago, Borevitz has sold her snails to families and businesses seeking a natural way to get rid of the brown snails.

She counts the San Diego Wild Animal Park, Legoland and the Four Seasons Resort Aviara among her steady clients.

"We try to keep everything as natural as possible and use beneficials wherever we can," said Cary Sharp, botanist at the Wild Animal Park. Beneficials are insects and animals that prey on pests.

At the end of last year, Borevitz sold her one-millionth snail.

Recently, Borevitz could be found kneeling in the shade of an orange tree, gently brushing away cuttings she had left on the ground. There, amid sow bugs and rotting orange cuttings, were about 50 little snails, their shells the shapes of ice cream cones, with tiny gray heads peeking out.

The snails withdrew into their shells as Borevitz picked them up and rolled them around in the palm of her hand.

"Look at this," Borevitz said, holding several Decollate snails, the longest a quarter-inch. "Look at all these babies. When I see that, I know I've got snails to come."

Nearby were the remains of brown snails, their gutted shells polished clean.

The European brown snail was brought to California in the 1850s to be farmed for escargot. It's unclear what happened, but the snails were left to creep into crops, back yards and even freeway embankments – where the population at times made for slippery roadways.

Due to this year's extremely dry conditions, though, brown snails are not as much of a problem as they have been.

Though still unknown to frustrated homeowners who have battled snails with poison, the Decollates have been used for 150 years in the United States by growers, gardeners and, more recently, the state Department of Transportation.

Decollates are colonizers. They won't leave a garden like ladybugs do. They will stay, multiply and gradually expand their territory. But they don't climb, and therefore, won't leave slimy vertical trails.

Borevitz suggests 100 snails, which cost about \$20, for each 100 square feet. But don't expect immediate results. They are, after all, snails and can take months, even a couple years, to fully multiply and overwhelm the brown snails.

"The thing with our culture now is that we want instant gratification," said Debra Lee Baldwin, a freelance garden writer who lives in Hidden Meadows north of Escondido.

"We want fast food, we want fast everything, so it's a hard sell," she said.

Decollates aren't a one-shot solution, Baldwin noted. Each year, she adds more of the snails to her garden and culls out the adult brown snails.

By day, the killer snails stay hidden under mulch. At night, they surface for their hunt. Much smaller than the full-grown brown snail, Decollates typically go after the eggs of the brown snails as well as young brown snails.

Borevitz once happened upon a slow-motion attack of several Decollates on a large brown snail. She captured the feast on film; the snapshot evokes an image of wolves taking down a moose.

But since the group attack is probably a rare occurrence, Borevitz suggests taking out the adult brown snails, either by crushing or burying them, or by poisoning them several weeks before unleashing the Decollates.

The predatory snails do best in lush and moist ground cover – the same environment where brown snails make their home. Decollates won't eat leaves, as brown snails do, unless the leaves have dropped to the ground and are decaying. The same goes for fruit.

Though used in Southern California, the Decollate snail is banned in the northern part of the state for fear it would kill off native snails there.

For more on Mary's Decollate Snails, visit her Web site, at www.goodsnails.com