

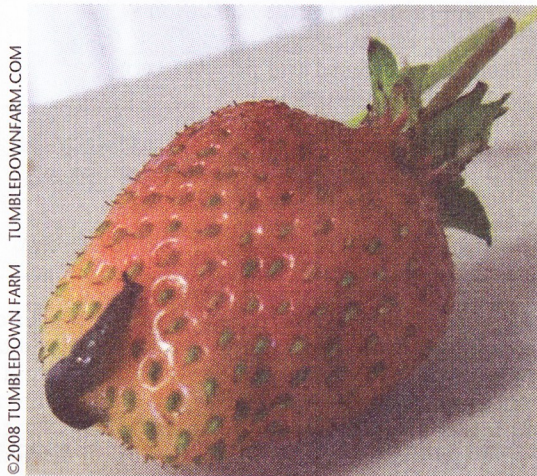
Sharing Nature's Bounty

by Angela Herrmann

I thought they were eating my strawberries. Each day, as I watched the berries ripen, I noticed that others also shared a keen interest. Indeed, as I gathered my harvest every other day, I noted deep gashes in some of the berries. I had no choice but to blame the robins.

American robins (*Turdus migratorius*) eat insects and worms. So why were they interested in the strawberries? Was it the seeds shining on the surface of each berry? Was it the sweet-tasting fleshy fruit that prompted them to compete with me for the bounty?

I carried these questions with me, along with my special berry-collecting bowl, each time I ventured into the strawberry patch. With each berry gash the mystery deepened. As I bent toward the ground, I noticed that someone else had taken an interest in the strawberries: the slugs.



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Every so often I found a berry with a hole or even a tunnel with a little slug inside it. And then it dawned on me: the robins probably weren't interested in the strawberries; they were interested in the slugs — thus the beak gashes scarring the surface of the berries. I suppose I could have attacked the slugs, lining the berry patch with bowls of beer in which to drown them. However, that would have deprived the robins of their food source.

Considering the number of unblemished strawberries picked at each harvest, I decided to write off the number of damaged ones as inconsequential. I saw those berries as my tithe in gratitude for the gift of sustenance. Besides, trying to destroy a tiny mollusk seemed contrary to the spirit of a garden, a place where people, plants and animals should peacefully coexist. They do in mature ecosystems, where cooperation is the norm, not the exception. What would it look like to mimic that cooperation in a garden?

Claiming ownership of nature and destroying a creature in the interest of a few more berries seemed counterintuitive. I began reevaluating my attitude about who was eating "my" strawberries. I offered the strawberry plants the gift of land. The strawberry plants, in turn, produced fruit. The slugs and I shared the berries and the robins ate the slugs.

I remembered a conversation I once had with an inmate at the Indiana Women's Prison, who gardened on the institution grounds. She had little access to seeds and bedding plants, so she gratefully accepted anything that was offered to her, including the gift of seeds deposited by passing birds. No plant was a weed to her. I wondered how many strawberry seeds the robins swallowed along with the slugs, and where they later deposited them. ♡

Angela Herrmann gardens near the White River in Marion County. She has compiled a list of Indianapolis community gardens at www.indygrowsgardens.com.



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