

How to get rid of 35 million pesky neighbors

The French have done a lot for San Francisco and the Bay Area during the past 150 years. One who arrived about 1850 did a little too much.

He found the weather mild, the nights cool, misty, a bit damp and drippy. His mouth watered. "Ideal weather for Escargot."

He sent off a request to someone in France and they shipped him a collection of European brown snails by slow boat.

He turned them loose in his garden, then impatiently waited for them to grow to a size that would go good with drawn butter and garlic. They grew quite satisfactorily. In fact, they thrived. They spread. Their descendants are with us still.

Trouble is, no one I know eats them. I've gathered gallons of snails from my yard, but I'm not about to eat the squishy little darlings.

I estimate the snail population of Pacifica at somewhere between 12 million and 35 million. The lower figure averages out to one crawly little mollusk every 30 square feet. Since some yards probably average a snail every square foot, that is likely a gross, and I do mean gross, underestimate.

Snails hide everywhere. Fences, under boards, trash, the underside of leaves, ivy, walls, even the underside of trash cans will serve. Snails love Agapanthus (Lily of the Nile) so much I

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used to think of my clump as a snail trap.

Perhaps we might take a positive approach and use our snail crop to increase our tax base. We could set up a snail cannery in some vacant classrooms, or in a back room of the new Sanchez Arts Center. Perhaps we could get a small business loan to buy equipment. Where would you find a knowledgeable consultant who would know how to can snails? There must be a few out there, but I don't know them.

School kids could earn spare change gathering the crop.

Homeowners would probably be delighted to generously tip the most successful collectors, since every snail for the cannery would be one less in the yard. The properties whose owners refused to allow the gatherers access would function as wildlife preserves, since their overflow would continually restock the neighbors whose yards were depleted by vigorous snail gathering.

Sales promotion will take some

imagination. A clever brand name would be important. "Backyard Gourmet," perhaps. Or "San Pedro Shelled Delights." We could ship to France and Germany, where snails are an endangered species, thanks to European gourmets. Before we start the sales program we will have to quit poisoning the crop. No more arsenic, metaldehyde, or other chemicals. Just a strong flashlight and a bucket. If we can't develop an export crop, perhaps we could learn to add butter and garlic and enjoy them right here. Wonder how they'd do as a side dish to go with Nick's skirt steak?

Or perhaps snails might serve as the specialty of the house for a new French restaurant at Shelter Cove.

It would be the only restaurant in the Bay Area where the customers would have to walk a quarter mile to the front door, but the view is great. Maybe a cog railway from Blackburn Terrace would do the job.

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