

The yellow blob in the garden is OK

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For most people, the first signs of spring are the sighting of a flock of robins in their backyards, the first crocuses among the quickly greening grass, or an abundance of yellow daffodils where yesterday there were just green shoots.

For me, it is not officially spring until I start receiving phone calls and e-mails describing strange, bright yellow, fungus-like masses crawling slowly across newly mulched garden beds. Most reports include the phrase, "looks like dog vomit."

I usually take exception with this last descriptor. Being the owner of a 4-year-old golden retriever that frequently eats unknown objects and just as frequently vomits, I have become quite familiar with dog vomit and it looks nothing like a plasmodial slime mold.

Answering inquiries about the slime mold *Fuligo septica* has become a spring ritual for me over the past 30 years. *Fuligo septica* has been given the common name scrambled egg slime, and, ironically, dog vomit slime.

This is the most famous of the approximately 400 species of slime molds, largely because the June 11, 1973, issue of *Newsweek* reported on blobs "big as a platter, foamy and creamy and pale yellow" that terrorized the Dallas suburb of Garland.

Slime molds were once considered fungi but are now part of the Kingdom Protista along with unicellular algae, protozoa and water molds. *Fuligo septica* first appears after the germination of spores, which have been laying dormant in the soil or in the mulch you just placed on your plantings.

The spores give rise to microscopic myxamoeba or swimming (flagellated) cells, depending on the amount of moisture present. These cells fuse to form a zygote that quickly grows to a yellow slimy mass. The bright yellow slimy mass is the plasmodial stage of the slime mold's life cycle, and definitely the most no-



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Scrambled egg slime (*Fuligo septica*) is a common slime mold found in the spring, usually on newly mulched areas.

ticeable. The plasmodia are naked (devoid of cell walls) masses of protoplasm.

The slime mold plasmodia creep about over the surfaces of materials, engulfing bacteria, spores of fungi and plants, protozoa, and particles of nonliving organic matter. The close observer will actually see the plasmodia undulate and move, albeit very slowly.

Typically, after identifying this slime mold for someone and explaining the life cycle of *Fuligo septica*, the next question is, "How do I get rid of it?" My answer is always the same, don't get rid of it, enjoy it!

The plasmodial slime mold is actually beneficial. By digesting organic matter that is tied up in the mulch, nutrients are made more readily available to the green plants. Attempts to move the slime mold are usually wasted effort, and washing it away will only allow the flagellated cells to spread more easily.

After just a few days, the plasmodia convert into spore-bearing structures. In *Fuligo*, the plasmodia convert into a crusty, cake-like mass of darker and variable color. The brittle crust eas-

ily breaks away to reveal a dark purple to brown mass of spores. This structure is called an aethalium.

Fuligo septica produces the largest spore-producing structure

of any known slime mold. *Fuligo septica* is completely harmless, unless you're a protozoan, so be sure to enjoy this spring visitor to your garden, it will only be around for a few days.

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