

Ants In Your Pants... And Everywhere Else

By Barry Murray

Ants might be small, but their impact can be big. Many people feel ants are merely a nuisance to be brushed aside like the crumbs that attract them, but some species can cause structural damage to your home or business, contaminate food, destroy seeds, damage plants and even attack and injure animals and humans.

Ants are seemingly everywhere; they eat almost anything and have few natural predators to control their numbers. They are also among the most difficult pests in the world to control.

People try traps, sprays and other methods, yet the ants seem to keep coming back -- and in larger numbers.

Add to that the proliferation of non-native species, and there is no doubt that there are more ants now than there were 20 years ago.

These imported ants -- such as the South American Fire Ant and the White Footed Ant from Japan -- have no natural enemies and aggressively out-compete native species for food. In the case of the White Footed Ant, they simply out reproduce native species.

These unwanted guests have become an expensive nuisance throughout the southern United States.

In the Deep South, the Fire Ant -- which immigrated to the United States in the 1930s -- causes millions of dollars in damage annually. They nest in soil at the base of trees, shrubs, grass or in homes and are extremely aggressive, swarming and killing livestock, short circuiting electrical equipment and burrowing under rural roads. Single queen mounds can number 30-100 per acre with up to 250,000 ants each.

In Florida, the White Footed Ant -- an accidental Japanese import in the mid 1980s -- drives homeowners to distraction simply because of their ubiquitous presence and appetite for sugar. They are extremely prolific, reproducing at Herculean rates. Unlike other ants that rely on a single queen and specialized ants to reproduce, 50 percent of the White Footed Ant colony can produce offspring. Their colonies can house more than one million ants. Fortunately, they don't cause damage or injury.

The same cannot be said for the Carpenter Ant, the most common species found in homes throughout the northern United States. A silent menace that destroys wood and can cause worse damage to homes than termites, Carpenter Ants thrive in the same

environment as humans. Outdoors, colonies are usually located in dead wood such as fallen tree limbs, tree holes and stumps. Indoors, they settle in roofs, ceilings, walls, ventilated crawl spaces and in the attic. The Queen can live 15 years. Her workers live as long as seven years and can forage up to 300 feet from the colony. Carpenter ants feed on insects and human food and will bite people when disturbed.

Other common ants varieties include:

- **Ghost Ants**, whose colonies contain several reproductive females and hundreds of thousands of extremely small workers, can occupy several nesting sites and spread a variety of bacteria.
- A severe pest in the southern United States and California, **Argentine Ants** nest in moist soil next to or under buildings and are well adapted to urban environments. These pests feed on sweets and have multiple queens in each nest.
- Nesting in wall voids behind baseboards and between liners, **Pharaoh Ants** spread a variety of bacteria. Colonies contain several reproductive females and hundreds of thousands of workers which are about 1/16th" long.
- **Big Head Ants** feed on meats, greases and breads and may invade homes in search of food. They nest in soil or rotten wood and are found in warmer and dryer sections of the United States. They get their name from the enlarged heads of soldier ants.
- **Crazy Ants** are common indoor pests in the northern sections of the United States and are often found outdoors in the south. They nest in small cracks and crevices and feed on animal matter, greases and sweets.
- Normally found in decayed wood outdoors, **Acrobat Ants** may infest a home in search of food. Their name comes from their tendency to raise their abdomens over their heads when excited.

An ant prevention program should include the following elements:

- First, identify which types of ants have invaded your home.
- Then, inspect your house by circling it and cutting away any plants that touch the structure. Ants use plants as a bridge to enter homes.
- To deal with ants already inside, make sure all food is sealed in containers. Ants are also attracted to water, so drain your sink after washing the dishes. Also make sure to dry counter tops.
- Granular bait formulas applied outside a structure have proven to be the most effective treatment for controlling indoor ant infestations. However this bait is only available to licensed pest-control operators who have proper training and equipment. Homeowner versions are available, but not as effective.
- Other consumer indoor ant baits may work for Pharaoh ants and Argentine ants. Be sure to look for products with delayed toxicants, such as hydramethylon and sulfuramid.
- An inexpensive home remedy for sweet-loving ants is one percent boric acid in a 10 percent sugar solution. However, there are disadvantages to this approach: it is very slow acting and, because the colonies are so large, they must be given a constant supply, which means you will have to check the bait regularly. Even then, control is not guaranteed.

- If you choose to spray, try to limit it to spot treatments where ants are entering a structure such as door thresholds.

Remember, it's much easier to deal with ants if you take action as soon as you see them. It doesn't take long for ants to swarm and take up residence in your home or business, spreading bacteria and destroying your property. They should be taken seriously.

Barry Murray, national spokesperson for Truly Nolen, has appeared in more than 500 television segments nationally as the "Jack Hanna of Bugs" and has nearly 15 years of experience in the pest control industry. Barry brings an informative as well as unique and entertaining perspective to consumers' pest problems in the 21st Century.