

2009 Pest Alert #4

Xing Ping Hu

Ants, ants, and more ants

There are approximately 10,000 different known species of ants living on our planet. There are maybe another 10,000-plus ant species that we don't know about yet, explaining why we are constantly finding new ant species in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. At local perspective, there are about 750 ant species commonly found in North America, but only less than 30 are commonly found in homes and structures. Some of them are public health threats and potentially dangerous to humans and animals.

Ants bite and sting, posing risk to human health, especially fire ants. Another rarely known fact is some ant species can also be the potential source of food-borne illness. Several years ago, University of Florida recovered pathogen bacteria from Pharaoh ants and fire ants after allowing them eat dead roaches infested by the pathogen bacteria.

Ants do not eat wood, not a common concern of property damage. But the destructiveness of carpenter ants is well known. They nest in wood and damage lawns and defoliate leaves. As for fire ants, they can actually undermine pavement on driveways, causing settling and cracking and consequential water damage. The damage they do to buildings can also make it easy for termites to building tunnels into that area. You may have found termites love fire ant mounds to get warm in winter.

The complexity of the variety of ant species and different biology associated with each ant species make controlling them difficult at times. Therefore, correct identification is a must before considering control methods. While sometimes it is necessary to let the pest management professional to do the control job, homeowners can fix ant problem if they are knowledgeable.

Bearing in mind, unlike most household pests, ants are active 24 hours a day. They have specific food requirements and need water. They follow chemical trails in food searching. Most sources of ant are outside, so spray inside homes is not a good practice. Therefore, first know your target species and figure out where they are located by looking for water source and harborage habitat. Then look for the bridges and tunnels they enter homes. Place ant baits (sugar-based or protein-based, depending on ant species and their physiological need) on or in the bridges and tunnels, let ants feed and be intoxicated. You may also destroy the bridges and tunnels to cut off the routes ants use to invade homes.

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