

ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot For week of June 1, 2009

Early June is Good Timing for Fire Ant Control

You've probably got mounds in your yard or landscaping caused by Imported Red Fire Ants. It seems that we are constantly fighting the ants' invasion. The red imported fire ant is from South America. It came to the United States in ship ballast and arrived in Mobile, Alabama in 1932. Since then, they have spread and changed the ecology of the Southeast.

Entomologists now think that there were actually several introductions over the years. There is a genetic variation among the red fire ants and there is also a black imported fire ant. Whatever their origin, these troublesome insects seem to survive our attempts to eradicate them.

Fire ants are social insects. The mound usually contains a single reproductive queen and thousands of sterile female workers. Some fire ant colonies can also contain multiple queens. An established mound will produce new winged queens and winged males during the warmer months of the year, but most are produced in the spring. These ants fly into the air and mate. Mated queens then return to the ground and start new colonies. Many of the mated queens fall victim to predators which include established fire ant colonies in the area.

Fire ant workers tend to young ants, feed each other and the queen, forage for food and defend the colony. Since they had no natural enemies in their new home, they spread and became a serious pest.

The first attempt to eradicate fire ants was the widespread application of an insecticide called Mirex. This insecticide is related to DDT and was determined to be an environmental threat. The insecticide was in a bait formulation that also contained soybean oil and corn cob grit.

New insecticides have been developed as well as insect growth regulators that are much more effective in controlling fire ants. Because of the foraging behavior of fire ant workers and the way food is dispersed through the mound, baits tend to be the most effective method of control.

A complete list of fire ant control materials is available on the Extension website at <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0175-A> or by calling the Extension Office at 232-5510.

Fire ant bait should be applied on a warm, sunny day with no chance of rain. To make sure fire ant workers are foraging, place a piece of hot dog or cheese cracker on the side walk. If ants are foraging, they will show up within about 20 minutes. Apply bait as a broadcast treatment according to label directions. Use fresh bait and avoid bait that has become stale or rancid. Do not apply bait if dew is still on the ground or if rain is expected. Some baits can also be used to treat individual mounds.

Fire ant bait works because of the way fire ant colonies process food. Adult workers cannot eat solid food. The workers bring food back to the mound and feed it to immature fire ants. These immature fire ants then regurgitate some of the food and this is what is fed to the other workers and the queen. Because food is shared in the mound, anything one ant eats is eaten by all the other ants and the queen. If the queen becomes sterile due to the effect of the insect growth regulator or insecticide in the fire ant bait, the colony eventually declines and dies out. Killing the queen is the key to fire ant control.

Be patient. It takes several weeks for bait to work. The best time of the year to apply bait is the first week of June and again the first week of October.

If you have questions on home gardening or related topics, remember that the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a 'HelpLine' on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are highly trained and willing to help with your home gardening and home grounds questions. Their phone number is 232-5510 and they are located in an office at the Limestone County Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens.

