HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FIRE ANTS

If you have never experienced a fire ant bite, consider yourself lucky. The fire ant is probably the most disliked insect found in Florida. Imported accidentally from Brazil to Alabama in the 1930's, the fire ant has spread quickly throughout the southeast, going west into Texas and north into Virginia.

Imported fire ants are aggressive. They construct nests, which are dome-shaped mounds of soil, sometimes as large as 3 feet across and 1 1/2 feet in height. The mounds are usually built in sunny, open areas such as lawns, pastures, and meadows, but they are not restricted to these areas. Mounds or nests may be located in rotting logs, around trees and stumps, under pavement and buildings, and occasionally indoors.

When their nests are disturbed, the fire ants will quickly run out of the mound and attack any intruder. Their bites are a painful, burning sting that results in a pustule and intense itching, which may persist for 10 days. Some people have allergic reactions to fire ant stings that range from rashes and swelling to paralysis. Fire ants may also attack pets, livestock, and wildlife.

Once a colony is established, a single queen can lay over 2,000 eggs per day. It takes approximately 45 days for an ant to hatch and mature into an adult. Most adult fire ants will live anywhere between 1 to 6 months; however, queens can live an average of 6 to 7 years.

Fire ants will feed on just about anything from carbohydrates (e.g. honeydew, sugars, syrups), to proteins (e.g. insects, meats), and lipids (e.g. grease, lard, oils from seeds). Fire ants cannot digest solid foods, but can regurgitate them into a consumable food source.

Control for fire ants can be quite difficult. Many people have their own "home remedies" for fire ants, but most have not been proven effective by the researchers at the University of Florida. They may seem to work, by killing many ants, however the survivors of the colony will just relocate the mound to another area.

There are also many products for fire ant control. One of the most popular is fire ant bait, which the ants forage, consume, then are killed by the chemicals. These can be an effective, if applied properly. A three-step approach is needed for control. The first step is to broadcast (spread evenly) the bait throughout the entire lawn. In 3-5 days, spot treatments will need to be done around the mounds. This consists of sprinkling the bait around the mounds. Never put baits directly into the mounds. Fire ants forage for their food. Baits dropped into a mound will be treated like an invasion and the ants will not eat the bait and will relocate their mound. The third step is to create a barrier of bait around the perimeter of your property to keep other ants out. Be careful not to disrupt the mounds. Even poking a stick in the mound will cause the fire ants to relocate and disrupt the baiting process.

Complete control will take several weeks to achieve. There are three different toxicants, or active ingredients that are available in broadcast bait products specifically registered for use against fire ants. You must read the labels of the products to find out what the active ingredient is. Hydramethylnon is a slow-acting poison that kills all members of a colony that ingest it. After 1 to 5 weeks, 80 to 90% of the fire ant colonies in the treated area will be killed. However, these areas are subject to reinfestation.

Two of the other active ingredients interfere with reproduction, and are often referred to as insect growth regulators, or IGRs. These products are good because they are species specific, meaning that they will only affect fire ants and will not harm wildlife. The active ingredient abamectin, prevents queens from laying eggs. Fenoxycarb is another IGR active ingredient that prevents queens from laying worker eggs. Because workers are no longer being produced, colonies treated with IGRs will eventually be eliminated because the queen will not be cared for and will die as workers die off naturally. Abamectin and fenoxycarb
products may take 5 to 10 weeks to eliminate 90% of the colonies, and large treated areas may have control for as long as a year. Control in smaller areas is not as long lasting because these areas are more easily reinfested from adjacent areas, which is why it is important for everyone in a community to work together to control fire ant populations.

There a number of other methods for controlling fire ants, but using the three-step bait process is usually the most effective control. For more information on fire ants and other control methods, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm at (321) 697-3000.

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