CARPENTER ANTS

Why do ants think your house is their home? Wet weather has forced many ground dwelling ants to seek shelter above ground so you might have a few uninvited guests wandering your halls.

The big ants causing concern these days are most likely carpenter ants. They are not quite big enough to carry a tool belt, but they do like working with wood, especially damp wood.

*Camponotus floridanus*, the scientific name for the most common species of carpenter ant found locally, is two-tone rust and black with a large head. There may be several different looking ants, with and without wings, found in a group. Size varies from one ½ inch to ¾ inch. These ants don’t sting but can bite.

Pictures are online at [http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/urban/ants/fl_carpenter_ants.htm](http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/urban/ants/fl_carpenter_ants.htm). Call the University of Florida/IFAS Osceola Extension Office Plant Clinic at 321-697-3000 for assistance in pest identification.

Carpenter ants are primarily tree dwellers living in decayed, damp wood. Unlike termites, they do not eat wood, but prefer wood that is soft so they can excavate nests or galleries to live in. So why would they think your home is an old, damp, rotten log? The key components seem to be wood, water and access.

Contractors can choose alternative products such as plastic grade stakes, concrete block walls, steel studs, even steel rafter frames, but we still have many other components that are wood.

Water is easy to find around a home. We pipe it inside and outside. These days, rain has provided an additional water source. Water leaks cause damp wood and are one of the major problems that invite carpenter ants to join us, just like putting out a welcome sign. They don’t know it is polite to knock before entering a home.

If you find carpenter ants, don’t grab the spray. Track them and look for leaks. They feed at night so that is a good time to watch them and follow them back to the central nest location. They will likely lead you right to the leak. Young children armed with flashlights may be your best and cheapest detectives!

This is a good time to inspect the roof and clean out gutters. Damp wood may be from a roof leak around a fireplace, vent or change in roof line, poor gutter attachment or leaf litter on the roof. Improper flashing around windows and doors may result in moist wood. Also check areas where wires and pipes enter the home and be sure to seal them.

Leaking appliances made my house simulate a damp log. I found my 20 year old dishwasher and the gasket at the icemaker connection were leaking. Thank goodness for the carpenter ants alerting me so I could get the appliances replaced and repaired before major water damage occurred.

Plumbing leaks also cause moisture. Look around tubs and showers. Check for broken tiles, cracked grout, even bubbled paint and soft drywall that indicate leaks in the wall. Inspect the connector hoses and drain lines of older washing machine or dishwashers and replace old ones to avoid water damage from bursting hoses.

Air conditioning condensate drain lines develop slimy algal growth inside and clog resulting in water on the floor or in walls. Check with your maintenance manual for where to add bleach or call for annual service to have the coils cleaned and the line cleared. You will save thousands of dollars in carpet and floor repair.

Since carpenter ants are arboreal tree nesters, instead of subterranean ground nesters, it is important to limit access where trees and shrubs might touch the house or incoming wires. Keep leaves off the roof and trim shrubs and trees to allow good air circulation around the home. Use caution around any wires
entering the house and consult the power company or a licensed professional to assure your safety.

If you locate a carpenter ant colony or nest indoors, pesticide dusts, residual chemicals or pyrethroid sprays labeled and approved for crawling insects are effective controls. Be sure to read and follow all label directions.

Carpenter ants are often a warning of other problems. Be aware. Look for the nest. Locate and repair leaks. Control moisture and access and carpenter ants will look elsewhere for a place to set up housekeeping.

Wood and water are also key ingredients for termites. Several new publications on termites and home care and maintenance are now available. Go to osceola.ifas.ufl.edu announcements for more details or call the Extension Office at 321-697-3000.

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