Has our summer rain pattern started? We hope so, but there is a good and a bad side to every story. The rains have flooded ants from their in ground homes and has triggered the flight of mating swarms. Residents are bringing samples to the Master Gardener Plant Clinics for diagnosis. They are concerned about whether the insects are ants or termites. Winged insects are showing up in bathrooms, garages, swimming pools, and on patio enclosures.

It is easy to confuse termites and ants at first. After seeing photographs and the shape of the insects and explaining a little "ant"natomy, most visitors are relieved to discover they have been plagued with ants instead of termites. Ants have a narrow waist, while termites are thick from the neck down to the tail. Ant antennae have elbows where they bend in an L shape.

Florida is home to many ants. Some live outdoors in our landscape; others are pests in our homes. Many of the samples brought to the Osceola Cooperative Extension Office recently have been large, winged carpenter ants.

Carpenter ants naturally live outside in rotten logs. These large ants are ¼ to ½" long, have a pointed abdomen, or tail segment, and are reddish brown. You may see a group of winged ants of several different sizes or a single large ant roaming the building.

This time of year, part of the colony develops wings and flies away to find a new home in damp wood. Sometimes, a few will enter buildings to looking for food or a nesting place.

A lone ant or two is not considered an infestation but is a hint that the house is not sealed well. Check weather stripping around doors and windows for a good fit. Also, be sure that openings around pipes and wires coming into buildings are sealed to keep outside things outdoors where they belong.

A swarm of ants may be a sign that a colony lives nearby. If found outside, they are just a part of nature's wonder, but if the swarm is found indoors, investigate further. Since carpenter ants prefer warm, moist logs, be sure your house isn't providing similar desirable conditions.

Look for wet wood. Check that the roof isn't leaking; that there are not leaky pipes in the walls and that windows and doorways are waterproof. Sometimes carpenter ants will move into old termite damaged wood.

If a colony is located, a dust formulation of pesticide can be applied along nearby trails. Use lightly to avoid repelling the ants. Be sure the product is labeled for use where ever it is being applied, either outdoors, indoors or both. Baits will work if the ants eat them. Put some out and watch for feeding. Read and follow all label directions and precautions.

The main focus in managing household insect pests is to identify the insect, learn their natural behaviors and then stop the natural cycle of growth and reproduction. Several good references on ants are available from the Florida Cooperative Extension Service. Free fact sheets provide information on many of our Florida pest ants. ENY 203 covers ant biology and pest management methods while ENY 259 explains ant
trails, the use of baits and proper placement for good pest control.

Color picture pages are for sale which help residents and pest control technicians identify different types of ants. Individuals interested in the variety of pests which live in and around our homes may want to order a University of Florida publication, SP 134. The book contains a set of fact sheets and color pages on many different Florida critters. The cost is $13 plus shipping and tax. Order forms are available from the Osceola Cooperative Extension Service or you can order on line at http://ifasbooks.ufl.edu.

If you are not sure what is bugging you, stop by to see the Master Gardeners each week on Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Call (321) 697-3000 or stop by the office at 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane in the Osceola Heritage park.

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