PLANT LIFE COLUMN

ANTS IN THE HOME

Heavy rains flood ants out of their underground homes. Your home may become their home as they look for high and dry ground. Integrated pest management strategies include keeping them out and starve them if they move in.

Tight weather stripping around doors and windows goes a long way in keeping outdoor pests outside. Some insects, including some types of ants adapt well to life inside our homes and offices. So, once they are inside, they are difficult to get rid of.

Cleanliness, keeping the ant's food supply to a minimum, is one way of managing indoor ants. In other words, starve them. Unfortunately, ants can adapt and eat a variety of things to survive.

Any type of food or food crumbs can attract and provide food for ants. One solution is to store food in tight containers.

Ants are attracted to plants infested with sucking insect pests including aphids, whiteflies and mealy bugs. The ants feed sugary honeydew which the insects secrete. Remove plants that are infested with these sucking type insect pests.

Ants need moisture to survive so reduce moisture sources, including condensation and leaks. Towel dry moisture around sinks.

Location of the nest is key to control because ants are social insects. Large numbers of individual ants can be killed without ever solving the problem.

Determine the kind of ant species so you can plan the best method of control. Most species of ants never enter buildings; others build their nest near buildings and forage (search) for food indoors. Others usually nest indoors.

Keep a record of where ants have been seen. Some ants follow definite trails. If possible, follow these trails to the nest. Place small amounts of foods such as jelly, oil, or peanut butter to attract large numbers of ants so they can be followed to their nest.

Find the ant nest by watching the movements of ants. Young children like to watch ants and can be very useful in tracing their trails. Indoors, ants may nest in walls, behind a baseboard, or under the house. Often ant trails enter through a crack but the nest may be some distance away. Some ants may also nest in decayed or rotting wood in the house.

Chemical control of ants indoors can be applied as barrier treatments, nest treatments, and bait treatments.

It is important to identify the type of ant pest before using ant spray treatments since this can cause colonies to split or bud. Species that reproduce by budding (for instance, Pharaoh ant, Argentine ant, and ghost ant) result in more ant colonies instead of control.

Bait treatments are effective for control of many ant species if the baits are consumed by the ants. Ant baits containing such active ingredients as fenoxy carb, hydramethylnon (Combat) or sulfluramid (Raid Max) are labeled for residential use. They are enclosed in childproof plastic trays and are broadly labeled for many ant species.

A sugary homemade poison bait is also an effective chemical control method for homeowners, according to Dr. Phil Koehler, Entomologist with the University of Florida. First, place "feeding stations" of an
attractive food, such as sugar water, in various locations to see where the ants are most likely to want lunch. Use small lids such as those from milk jugs. Some researchers found the ants attracted to mint apple jelly or peanut butter. Try what ever you think will work best. It will take some patience.

Once the ants have started dining at your little cafeterias, then feed them a poisoned solution. Dr Koehler's recipe is to mix 1 level teaspoon of boric acid with 2½ fl. oz. of corn syrup, honey or other ant food. Heat it until the boric acid dissolves. Cool. Dilute the bait with an equal amount of water and put it in the feeding stations. Be sure to refill the cafeteria trays for 2 weeks. Always place the bait stations out of reach of children and pets. Patience. It will take time to kill the thousands of ants which could be nesting in the walls.

Ant control indoors is challenging. Once you know what type of ants are bugging you, it is easier to control them.

Bring samples for identification to the Master Gardener Plant Clinic at the Extension Office, 1901 E. Irlo Bronson Highway. Volunteers are available on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm. Call (321) 697-3000 for free fact sheets on managing ant pests.

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