



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Ants

No. 3

More About Bugs and Their Relatives Series

1. What do ants look like?

If you have crawling insects which don't have wings, are narrow in the middle, and have antennae with a bend or "elbow", then they are probably ants. A number of different species of ants may be found in households, ranging in size from 1/16 inch to close to 1/2 inch, and in color from light yellow to dark brown or black. If possible you should have the ants identified to species because some require special control procedures.



2. The ants seem to appear out of nowhere. Where did they come from?

Most ants build their nests outdoors in soil. They eat a variety of things, such as flower nectar, aphid or whitefly honeydew, and living or dead insects. Ants enter houses in search of food in the early spring or late fall when flowers or insects are not readily available outside. Occasionally, they may seek shelter indoors when their nests are flooded.

Ants can appear suddenly. One day you will notice them streaming all over your pet's food, and then you will open your cupboard or pantry and find them in any foodstuff that is open. You almost never see an ant by itself, they are usually in groups. This is because when one individual, (called a worker) finds some food, it lays a trail of chemical scent back to the nest. Other workers follow the trail back to the food and in a very short time a large number can be recruited.

3. I have ants in my house. How do I get rid of them?

It is important to understand a little about ant biology in order to control ants successfully. Ants are social insects, which means they live in groups of numerous individuals called colonies. One individual, called a queen, produces all the eggs. She stays deep within the nest where she is protected. The ants you usually see are the workers. Their main job is to gather food and take care of the young ants. When you smash a few of the worker ants, you may actually be doing very little to control the colony as a whole. It is likely there is a fresh supply back in the nest, and the queen will produce more.

To control ants successfully:

a. You should **remove any sources of food** the ants find. Vacuum up all crumbs and remove and clean pet food dishes that may be attractive to ants. Store food in containers with tight-fitting lids. If in doubt, keep the food in the refrigerator or freezer.

b. **Block or plug any entrances**, if they can be located. Caulk works well for cracks.

c. **Put out ant traps**. Ant traps contain a mixture of an attractant or bait material (usually a mixture of sweets and oils), and a slow-acting poison. The worker ants enter the trap, feed on the poisoned material and carry it back to their nest. Once inside the nest, they feed bits of the poisoned material to the queen and immatures and the entire colony is controlled. Many ant traps are available commercially or you may want to try a homemade bait mixture of about one part boric acid (or borax) and two parts mint jelly or cracker crumbs. Place the bait in a container with ant-sized holes in the lid. Place in a location away from children and pets, and dispose of the container after use. Although boric acid once was a common ingredient in eye washes, it may be harmful if swallowed.

The advantage of this method of controlling ants is that you can control the colony without having to locate the nest. The disadvantages are that it takes a week or so before you begin to see results, and although the attractants in the bait are as generic as possible to attract many different kinds of ants, the species of ant infesting your home may not choose to feed on it. This is especially true if they have found alternative sources of food (see 3a).

d. If baits do not work, you may want to resort to **sprays**. The problem with sprays is that they may only kill a few workers and not destroy a colony that is well hidden. However, sprays do work quickly. Do not use sprays with baits, because you want the workers to carry the poison back to the nest. If they are killed on the way by the spray, they can not feed the poison to the rest of the colony.

e. If you can trace the ants to a nest in the yard, grind up orange peels in the blender or food processor to a fine slurry and pour immediately into the entrance holes. Citrus peels contain oils useful for controlling ants. This method works best on hot summer days. Granules and dust formulations of insecticides may also be used out of doors to control ants. These materials should be applied in a ring around the entrance of the colony and not directly over the hole. Reapply if ants relocate the entrance.

f. **Be patient**. Ants often disappear from your house as suddenly and mysteriously as they appeared. Usually this means they have found a better food source outside or that the adverse weather conditions have dissipated.

4. Do ants bite or sting?

Yes, some species of ant do sting. The ants best known for their sting, the imported fire ants, do not occur in Arizona. However their relative, the southern fire ant, is common in yards and may enter homes here. Although the stings are painful, they are harmless to most people. However, as with bee stings, some people may have a more severe reaction if allergic.

