CONTROLLING ANTS IN YOUR HOUSE

The Argentine ant is a frequent invader in California homes. Although they can be pests, ants provide an ecological cleansing and fertilization service of considerable importance. For example, they kill and eat many pest insects, aerate the soil, and recycle dead animal and vegetable material.

Because of these beneficial aspects, it is undesirable (and probably downright impossible) to eliminate ants from their outside habitat. The best approach to ant management is to try to keep them outdoors.

DETECTION

Look for individual "scouts" or long lines of ants in or around the house near food or water. Distinguish Argentine ants from Carpenter ants by size. Argentine ants are small (1/8"), and their queens are slightly larger. Carpenter ants are 1/4" or larger and require different management techniques from those listed below for Argentine ants.

LESS-TOXIC CONTROLS

Inside Your Home

- **Kill the scouts** so they can't call in the hordes when they find a tasty tidbit.
- **Use ant baits** because they use a minimum of insecticide and confine it to a very small area (see "Tips for Using Ant Baits" on back).
- **Use insecticidal dusts** such as diatomaceous earth (DE) in wall voids and cracks before they are sealed. Use a hand duster to apply DE and wear a dust mask and goggles. DE has little toxicity to humans or pets, but kills insects by absorbing their outer waxy coating, causing dehydration and death.

Outside Your Home

- **Use sticky barriers** around the trunk of a tree or bush to prevent ants from protecting aphids and other "honeydew"-producing insects. Prune any branches that touch walls, fences or the ground so ants cannot find alternate routes into the plant.
- **Ant Baits.** If you can find the spot outside where ants are entering the building (this is often difficult to do), place bait stations there; otherwise use baits only inside. Outside, rain and sprinklers can wash baits away, and you may end up *attracting* ants to your house.

PREVENTION

- **Store food in containers that seal tightly** or in the refrigerator when you notice ant activity.
- **Keep things clean and dry** and fix leaking faucets and pipes (ants need food *and* water).
- **Caulk cracks** where ants are entering the house. Weather-strip doors and windows.
- **Put pet dishes in a soapy moat.** Partially fill a wide, shallow container with soapy water and place pet dishes in the water.

QUICK FIX FOR AN
ANT EMERGENCY

1. Find what ants are after (usually left-over food) and where they are entering the room (usually through a crack in the wall). Mark it so you can find it again. If you can't find an entry point, see Step 5.
2. Don't remove the food until after Step 3 because ants will scatter. They are easier to kill in a line.
3. Clean up lines of ants with a vacuum, or spray ants with soapy water and wipe up with a sponge. Soap washes away the chemical trail ants follow.
4. Next, block entry point temporarily with a smear of petroleum jelly or a piece of tape. Use silicone caulk to permanently close cracks in walls, along moldings and baseboards, and in gaps around pipes and ducts.
5. If you can't find an entry point, clean up the ants (Step 3) to a convenient (preferably out-of-the-way) spot. Place the bait station on the line the ants had been following. Always remove the bait station when the line of ants has disappeared so you don't attract more ants into the house (see "Tips for Using Ant Baits").
6. If ants are nesting in a potted plant, move it outdoors. Water it thoroughly and place it in a bucket filled with water that comes an inch below the rim of the pot. Using a stick, make a bridge for the ants to get out of pot and bucket without getting in the water. The ants will soon begin carrying their white-colored young to safety. When no more ants emerge, drain the pot and return it to the house.

TIPS FOR USING ANT BAITS

Ant baits contain a pesticide mixed with an attractive food substance. Ants take small quantities of bait back to their nest to share with their nest mates. In this way the entire nest can sometimes be eliminated.

- Use baits with boric acid, hydramethylnon, or fipronil as an active ingredient. *Note that while fipronil is not a concern in containerized baits, it may be a concern in professional outdoor sprays.*
- Keep several different baits on hand because Argentine ants change their food preferences frequently. If one bait is not working, try another. Wait at least a day to see if they take the bait.
- Use baits inside (outside you may attract more ants to the house and rain and sprinklers will wash away bait).
- Do not spray insecticide around the bait; it will repel the ants.
- When ants are gone, remove the bait so you don't attract more ants. If the bait you are using comes enclosed in a bait station, return it to its original box to save and use again. Put the box inside a plastic bag and seal it with a twist-tie.
- Baits may take several weeks to kill the ants. At first you may see more ants coming to the bait, but after a few days to a week you should see a significant reduction.

PRODUCTS

Desiccating dust: Concern Diatomaceous Earth Crawling Insect Killer, Safer Ant and Crawling Insect Killer

Hand duster (for desiccating dust): Pest Pistol (if unavailable locally, call (888) 784-1722 or visit www.groworganic.com)

Sticky barriers: Tanglefoot, Stikem Tree Pest Barrier

Baits containing boric acid: Amdro Kills Ants (liquid ant bait), Drax Ant Kil Gel, Terro Ant Killer II Liquid Ant Bait Station

Containerized baits containing hydramethylnon: Amdro Kills Ants Ant Killing Bait Station, Combat Source Kill 4 Ant Bait (bait station)

Containerized baits containing fipronil: Combat Source Kill Max Ant Bait (bait station)

PESTICIDES AND WATER POLLUTION

Common household pesticides show up in treated wastewater and in local waterways, sometimes at levels that can harm sensitive aquatic life. So, water pollution prevention agencies have teamed up with participating retail stores, pesticide distributors, and manufacturers to reduce the risks associated with pesticide use. This fact sheet is part of a series of fact sheets and store displays aimed at educating residents about less-toxic pest management. For the rest of the series of fact sheets, visit www.ourwaterourworld.org. Also, look for the "**Our Water Our World**" logo next to products in participating stores and nurseries. See the Pesticides and Water Pollution fact sheet for information on active ingredients in common pesticides that may cause water quality problems.

Pest control strategies and methods described in this publication are consistent with integrated pest management (IPM) concepts, and are based on scientific studies and tests in actual home and garden settings. **Use suggested products according to label directions and dispose of unwanted or leftover pesticides at a household hazardous waste collection facility or event.** For more information on pesticide disposal, call 1-800-CLEANUP or visit: www.1800CLEANUP.org. No endorsement of specific brand name products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, contact:

Bio-Integral Resource Center (BIRC)
(510) 524-2567; www.birc.org

University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners in your area (in the phone book)

University of California IPM website
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu

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