

INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT: ANTS



Columns of ants marching through playrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms in family child care homes are a common problem. Don't panic! There are safe and effective ways to reduce the number of invading ants. Integrated pest management (IPM) is a strategy to prevent ant invasions and deal with ants without spraying pesticides.

Are ants a problem?

They're a nuisance in our house but rarely are they a health problem. Few ants in California threaten human health. Ants are actually beneficial when they're outdoors. They add oxygen to the soil and attack insects such as fleas, caterpillars, and termites.

What is the most common ant in California?

The common ant is the Argentine ant. They're dark brown and about 1/8-inch long. They have colonies that blend together into a huge ant community with hundreds of queens and millions of worker ants. With those kinds of numbers, no wonder ant infestations can seem never-ending.

What do Argentine ants eat?

Outdoors, Argentine ants eat insects for protein, but they usually prefer honeydew, which is a sweet liquid produced by aphids and other insects. You'll often find Argentine ants in bushes and trees that are infested with honeydew-producing insects. Ants often come indoors to find food during late summer and fall when honeydew is no longer available. They gather food and then return to the nest to feed others mouth to mouth. Ants find food using their sense of smell, which is why it's so important to clean food off counters and wipe spills with soapy water.

Where do Argentine ants live?

Outdoors, you'll find ants living in the soil next to buildings; along sidewalks; and under stones, tree stumps, plants, boards; or in other protected places. If it's really wet or dry outdoors, ants sometimes move their colonies inside into potted plants or under sinks. They prefer to live outside.

Why do baits work?

Ants feed each other by transferring food mouth to mouth. Slow-acting baits work better than sprays because the food-gathering ants (workers) share the poisoned bait with other workers and the queens.

- ▶ Colonies begin to shrink soon after the bait kills the queens.
- ▶ Both sugary and protein-containing baits may be necessary to manage Argentine ants.

IPM Strategies

1 DON'T SPRAY!

- ▶ Spraying pesticides will expose staff and children to harmful chemicals. Sprays kill only the ants you see, which are only about one percent of the colony. If you kill ants with a fast-acting spray, thousands more will soon replace them. This is why it's important to use baits (food mixed with a slow-acting poison) that reach the queens through mouth-to-mouth feeding of the workers.
- ▶ Ant management should focus on good sanitation and maintenance, not on spraying pesticides. If you still have ants coming in, use baits outdoors, not sprays, to reduce the number of ants inside the home, not to completely eliminate ants from outdoor areas.

2 KEEP ANTS OUT

- ▶ When you see ant trails in or around your building, follow the ants to their entry point. Caulk cracks around foundations or openings that provide entry from outside.
- ▶ Note where wires and pipes enter the building, where ants often come in.
- ▶ Keep plants and mulch at least 12 inches from foundations of buildings because they provide nesting sites for ants.

[IPM Strategies continued]

3 REMOVE ANTS' FOOD, WATER, AND SHELTER

- ▶ Store food such as snacks, sugar, syrup, honey, and pet food in containers with tight-fitting lids.
- ▶ Wipe spills and clean counters, tables, and floors with a microfiber cloth or paper towel.
- ▶ Remove garbage from the kitchen at the end of each day.
- ▶ Repair leaky sinks and pipes.
- ▶ Seal indoor cracks and crevices.
- ▶ Outside, remove food sources for ants next to buildings such as ripened fruit on trees. Use soap sprays, sold as insecticidal soap, on bushes and trees to reduce aphid numbers.

ACTION PLAN FOR ANTS

WHEN TO TAKE ACTION	NONPESTICIDE PRACTICES	LEAST HARMFUL PESTICIDE	LAST RESORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If you see a few Argentine ants inside, there are likely to be more soon. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Clean up ants using a microfiber cloth or paper towel with soapy water (in a labeled spray bottle combine one tablespoon dish soap and one quart water). ▶ Fill ant entryways with caulk or petroleum jelly. ▶ Remove infested potted plants. ▶ Clean up food sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Eliminate leaks or water sources. ▶ Use baits. Baits combine a food attractive to ants with a slow-acting poison such as boric acid. Baits shrink the colonies because workers feed them to the egg-laying queens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If ants continue to be present indoors, work with a pest management professional (PMP) who practices IPM to create a management plan. ▶ Insist that the PMP uses baits rather than spraying around the perimeter of your building.

LESS COMMON SITUATIONS

Only a few ants sting. Stinging ants include the native southern fire ant and California harvester ant, which live outdoors. One aggressive stinging ant that isn't native, the red imported fire ant, is found in a few locations in southern California and occasionally in farming areas throughout the state. If you think you have the imported red fire ant on your property, call the Fire Ant Hotline at (888) 434-7326.

A few other ants can become pests.

- ▶ **Pharaoh ants** are about half the size of Argentine ants and honey colored. They love protein, so watch for them around pet food.
- ▶ **Pavement ants** look like Argentine ants, but are chunkier. They usually live outdoors around lawns or under sidewalks and sometimes come in when the weather is dry.
- ▶ **Odorous house ants** live outdoors in soil or debris or indoors in wall voids or around water pipes or heaters. They're about the size of Argentine ants and also like sweets. When crushed, they smell like blue cheese or coconut.
- ▶ **Carpenter ants** are large ants—up to ½-inch long—that can bite. Because they tunnel through wood to build nests, they can damage buildings.

RESOURCES

- University of California Statewide IPM Program: *Ants*
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7411.html
- The Department of Pesticide Regulation, Safely Managing An Argentine Ant Infestation
www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/pestmgmt/pubs/childcare/ants_color_eng.pdf
- Our Water, Our World – Ants
www.ourwaterourworld.org/Portals/0/documents/pdf/Ants2-11.pdf

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