INSECT NOTES

HOUSEHOLD INFESTING ANTS

Ants are among the most abundant insects on earth. They have successfully invaded the artic and the tropics, the rainforest and the desert, the cornfield and the house! Of course, a great majority of ant species are not pests of man, and are beneficial, or at least don’t interact with man. But there are species in the agricultural and urban/household environment that are considered pests. Ants are one of the insects most often submitted for identification and control suggestions by homeowners.

There are some common species of ants that are frequent pests in and around houses and other structures. They include carpenter ants, yellow ants, crematogaster ants, and formica ants [actually, there are not any good common names for the last two species--sorry!]. A review of the biology, habits, and control of these species can help both experienced (don’t want to call them old!) and new Agents answer client questions.

Carpenter Ants. Among the wood-infesting insects, carpenter ants are important pests. Although they do not actually eat wood, and only build nests in it, they can cause considerable cosmetic damage to household timber, and sometimes real structural damage. In some parts of the U.S. these ants are more serious than termites. There are several species of carpenter ants in Virginia; the two most common are the black carpenter ant (which is all black) and the red carpenter ant (which is dark, brownish red). The black carpenter is the most common household pest. The red carpenter ant is more often a pest in wood piles, but can invade houses when conditions are favorable.

Camponotus
Carpenter ant nests are usually constructed in wood that is soft enough for them to create galleries for rearing young and to expand to accommodate a colony size of several thousand individuals. They often infest wood that has some moisture damage, because it is easy to "work", but they can and do infest wood that appears sound and without moisture damage. Carpenter ants feed on a variety of foods, and the workers will forage considerable distances to find what they need. They are often seen climbing trees in search of aphids and other insects to feed on. An important aspect of carpenter ant biology is that in the spring the worker ants will usually be encountered foraging during the day, but they will continue to shift the time of their foraging activity. By late summer (August) carpenter ants conduct most of their foraging activity at night--and can go unnoticed. Homeowner most often see these ants in the spring, around the dishwasher and sink--they apply a little insecticide, then don't see them any more. It could mean they have achieved control, it could mean that the ants are still there--but they have simply adjusted their foraging time so that they are not seen. A complicating feature of carpenter ant biology is their nest/colony building habits. These ants frequently have one "main nest site" that contains a majority of the colony, and several "satellite sites". Worker ants can move between these sites on a regular basis. This aspect can make successful location and control of carpenter ant nests/colonies a little difficult for homeowners and pest control operators.

Control of carpenter requires a little time, a little work, and a little luck! The main nest site must be located and removed or insecticide applied. In houses, the main nest site may be associated with moisture damaged wood. So, the first step should be to think where wood in and around the house may be exposed to excessive moisture. Although carpenter ants do make trails, they are not easy to find--so, there is little chance of "following" an ant back to the nest. Firewood piles can be an excellent location for carpenter ant nests--both main and satellite nests! When ants are noticed in the house in the early spring (Feb. and March), this is a good indication that the nest is in the house. When carpenter ants are noticed in the house during late spring and early summer, this is an indication that the nest is probably outside the house, and the ants are simply coming into the house looking for food. Nonchemical control of carpenter begins with location of the nest, removing it, and correcting any problems with moisture. Chemical control is achieved in the same manner, with the application of a residual insecticide to the nest site (and correcting any moisture problems). Spraying around the perimeter of the house with a residual insecticide may not be very effective in controlling carpenter ants--as you may be killing only a few workers and not affecting the nest very much.

Yellow Ants. These brown to yellowish brown ants are very common in and around houses. They can swarm during the spring, summer and fall, and are often confused with termites (because of their swarming time--they look nothing like termites!). There are actually two species of yellow ants--the larger yellow ant, and the smaller yellow ant. They look almost identical, and live in the same environments, so there is no need to make a distinction (although you
may see "larger" and "smaller" used on the insect identification sheets). Yellow ants frequently build nests in close association with structures, usually under concrete slabs or adjacent to foundations. They have been found nesting in foundation walls, between the wood sill plate and the top of the concrete blocks; they have been found nesting under sidewalks and porches, and under flower pots.

Yellow ants do not cause damage to household materials, their pest status is based primarily on their presence around the house, and the fact that they swarm in large numbers a few times during the year. Control of yellow ants begins with locating the nest. Location of the nest is not difficult, and control strategies, chemical and nonchemical, are easily applied. Nests can be removed with a shovel and a little effort; usually the nest will be destroyed by severe disruption, even if the queen is not located. Residual insecticides can be applied to the soil to prevent further problems.

**Formica Ants.** There is no "common name" for these ants, so the genus name (*Formica* spp.) is used--it's not a handy name! These ants are often confused with carpenter ants because they are black and can occur in large numbers around houses. However, these ants nest in the soil, and do not infest wood or houses! Their color is a shiny black, and actually quite different from the dull black of carpenter ants. Perhaps this color difference is difficult to recognize without some experience. Formica ants can build large nests in the lawn and yard, and can be seen foraging over a large area. Often they are encountered while mowing the grass or when children are playing close to a nest. These ants are not usually aggressive, but they are known to mount some mild "attacks" when the nest is disturbed. Control of formica ants is not difficult; nonchemical strategies would include a shovel and some effort to remove the nest, chemical strategies would include a liquid insecticide poured onto the nest.

**Crematogaster Ants.** Here is another ant that has no easy common name, so we use the genus name, *Crematogaster* spp., and call them that! These are small, maybe one-eight inch long, shiny, dark brown ants that are characterized by a "heart-shaped" abdomen. They are common throughout the state, and are frequently encountered as pests around and in
houses. Their pest status is based on the fact that they will nest in moisture damaged wood. Like carpenter ants, they do not eat wood, but use the soft areas of decayed wood to build their nests. The nests of this species are not very large, maybe only a few thousand individuals. They are small and can go unnoticed for a long time, except that sometimes fine sawdust will fall from the nest area. Crematogaster ants are trail-making ants, and you can often locate where the nest is by following the trail. Control is accomplished by removing the moisture damaged wood; spraying some residual insecticide may help to eliminate some stray ants that continue to search for the nest.