Don’t Let Ants Come Over Uninvited

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Here in Lancaster County, household ant identification and inquiries are high. Spring has sprung, but varying soil and air temperatures may not be stable enough to produce the food to support the many ants becoming active in the ecosystem. Believe it or not, ant nests are primarily located outdoors and they serve an important role in the food web as a natural predator to insects and arthropods. The reasons they enter your space include hunger, thirst and easy entry.

Your nice warm home may have a gap under the door, hole around the window, crack in the slab, utility openings or voids under wood of vinyl siding — all of which provide an open entryway for hungry foraging ants. The term foraging means “to wander in search of forage or food.” When a foraging ant detects food, she uses pheromones — chemical compounds — secreted from her body to communicate with nest mates that signal, “Food is this way! Follow me!” This is why sometimes you can see a distinct trail of ants leading to food and back to their nest.

It is important to know that though you feel as though your home has been invaded by multitude of ants, foragers comprise only a small portion of the colony. The rest of the colony, which include queens, eggs and larvae remain in the nest, most often located outdoors. Ants are social insects and they have a distinct caste system where each caste performs a specific task or job, and the foragers job is to find food to feed the colony.

Two common ants that are chemically referred to as “little black ants” are the pavement ant and the odorous house ant. Both ants are approximately 1/8-inch long, a brown-black color and associated with human activity. Neither species has an aggressive sting or bite. Rather, they are a nuisance when they enter homes and try to steal/seal food. Both ants are considered “sugar ants,” but have dietary needs like humans and at times feed on live and dead insects for protein.

Pavement Ant

As described by their common name, pavement ant colonies are most often found in sidewalks, driveways, slabs or rocks. They work tirelessly to excavate galleries underground, moving individual particles with their mouthparts. Their nests have piles of loose sand or dry particles along cracks, vegetation, stones, expansion joints, boards, lumber, firewood, bricks, and known to emit a very strong odor when crushed. The smell can be described as rotten coconut, licorice-like and/or a lemon-scented cleaning solution. Colonies can be found in close proximity to human activity and residences as nests can be found in landscape mulch, under boards, lumber, firewood, bricks, stones, debris and cardboard. When they located a food source they have found to have very distinctive trail behavior.

Integrated Pest Management for Ants

The first step in any pest issue is identification. Did you know there are close to 1,000 ant species in North America? Only a handful of them are household pests, but each one of those has a distinct appearance, behavior, feeding preferences and habitat. In order to eliminate the ant, you have to get to know the ant. The second step is to remove the conducive conditions that have allowed the ants to succeed thus far. Things like eliminating food, moisture and sealing up entry-ways into the structure. If you find they are trailing outdoors, seal the gap or hole with caulking or sealant appropriate for the location. Clean up the food source, which may be a piece of candy, cookie crumb, cupcake sprinkle or potato chip, then disinfect the area to remove traces of trail pheromone.

The third step is treatment which may include using an ant bait specifically for sugar-feeding ants. The ant bait to have an attractive, palatable, slow-acting toxic food source the ants will find and take back to the nest, share among nest mates and poison the entire colony. Both the pavement ant and the odorous house ant will readily feed on a liquid sugar ant bait, which can be purchased reasonably and easily at grocery and hardware stores.

• Read the label and follow instructions.
• Clean up to remove all competing food sources, especially sugary ones.
• Sugar bait can be sticky and messy. If they are not in ready-to-use stations, place droplets on small squares of aluminum foil.
• Apply bait as close to the trail as possible, as close to the nest or exterior wall as possible. Refrain from putting bait on the kitchen counter.
• Do not smash or squash the foragers you see because you need them to take the bait back to the colony.
• Monitor activity, make sure there is enough bait and allow ants to feed until there are no more foragers.

Possible reasons for control failure could be not enough bait for the size of the colony, changes in food preference and/or misidentification. Many ant baits are not labeled for carpenter ants because besides sweet food sources, a large portion of their diet consists of other insects, so a sugar bait alone will have little effect on the health of a colony. Possible reasons for control failure could be not enough bait for the size of the colony, changes in food preference and/or misidentification. Many ant baits are not labeled for carpenter ants because besides sweet food sources, a large portion of their diet consists of other insects, so a sugar bait alone will have little effect on the health of a colony.

Two common ants that are Odorous House Ant

As described by the common name, odorous house ants are associated with houses and known to emit a very strong odor when crushed. The smell has been described as rotten coconut, licorice-like and/or a lemon-scented cleaning solution. Colonies can be found in close proximity to human activity and residences as nests can be found in landscape mulch, under boards, lumber, firewood, bricks, stones, debris and cardboard. When they located a food source they have found to have very distinctive trail behavior.

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Creating a Backyard Turtle Pond

Do you enjoy turtles and want to create a backyard pond just for them? There are some important considerations when creating a backyard turtle habitat.

When creating a pond for turtles, it is important to give the turtles places to bask in the sun and provide cover to protect them from predators like dogs and cats. High grasses planted along the water’s edge and between rocks give turtles cover and places to hang out. Your pond must be located in a safe area so turtles can’t escape your property by crawling under, over or through a barrier.

Basking

The turtles found in our area are terrestrial in order to bring up their body temperature. This helps them digest their food. If a turtle can’t bask, it will starve to death. Rocks and partially submerged logs in and around your confined backyard turtle pond give the turtles suitable basking locations.

The water in your pond needs to be well-oxygenated and cooler than air temperatures. If your turtles get too warm while basking, they will need to go back into the water to cool down. Pond water should not rise above 80°F. One way you can keep the water cooler is to create a waterfall using a piping system.

Types of Turtles

Consider the red-eared slider for your confined backyard pond. These turtles are not native to Nebraska but are native to Kansas and Missouri. This turtle grows larger than our native painted turtles. People have released red-eared sliders into lakes and ponds within city limits. Because they are not native, they don’t belong in these bodies of water because they can move to other areas. However, for a backyard pond where the turtles are confined to the location, red-eared sliders are a good option. During winter, red-eared sliders should be moved indoors due to our colder climate.

According to Nebraska Extension Wildlife Specialist, Dennis Ferraro, you can have up to three native painted turtles in your pond as long as you can’t escape back into the wild which is against regulation in Nebraska.

Food

The red-eared slider feeds on aquatic plants like water lettuce. They will also feed on lilies, hostas, and cattails planted around a pond. This isn’t a problem if you don’t have a lot of turtles. Turtles will eat earthworms and small minnows you can get from a local bait shop. This is preferred diet over commercial turtle food.

Source: Backyard Farmer video: “Backyard Turtle Ponds,” online at https://wildlife.unl.edu/conservation

Before You Dig...

Before beginning any project, check with your local ordinance and learn about any regulations governing backyard ponds. To learn more, contact Diggers Hotline before doing any excavation: In Nebraska, visit Nebraska 811 at www.neicall.com or dial 811 or 800-331-5666.

Painted turtle basking on a rock

Small mounds of soil particles are signs of a pavement ant colony.