

# Managing Fire Ants

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## FIRE ANTS CONTINUE TO SPREAD

While there are several species of fire ants found in different parts of the United States, one species, the red imported fire ant, has become a particularly pressing problem around much of the country, causing billions of dollars in damage each year. They now infest 16 states, heavily concentrated in the southeast, but

allowed them to spread quickly, frequently displacing many native ant species along the way.

Through their natural reproductive process, fire ants can generally spread at a rate of five to 12 miles per year. However, this natural process is not the only means fire ants have of spreading

For example, the presence of fire ants in Delaware, a significant distance north of their natural range, surprised a number of people. Sure enough, the infestation, discovered in a landscaped portion of a townhouse development; was thought to have come from a shipment of azaleas from further south. With all the new territory fire ants have claimed on their own, they certainly don't need any human assistance.



## FIRE ANT CAN LINGER IN URBAN AREAS



reaching as far west as California and as far north as Delaware.

Red imported fire ants are an alien species of ant, meaning they are not native to U.S. soil. They were accidentally introduced into the United States in the 1930s when they arrived in a shipment from South America in the 1930s. They first became established in the area around Mobile, Ala. These immigrants found few natural enemies in the United States, which

allowed them to spread quickly, frequently displacing many native ant species along the way. Much as they arrived in the country as stowaways, groups of fire ants or even entire colonies can hitchhike in shipments of gravel, sand, soil, crops or other products.

These free rides contribute to the ants spreading faster and further, and have led to quarantines and restrictions on transporting certain products across many parts of the country. Floods also have been known to displace fire ant populations, dispersing them at an accelerated rate as entire colonies float down a river or stream. Fish have actually turned up dead with bellies full of fire ants after periods of frequent flooding.

“Depending on weather conditions and a number of other factors, the natural spread of fire ants is usually no more than a few miles a year, 12 to 15 at the very most,” says Dr. Charles Barr, an extension program specialist for the Texas Cooperative Extension. “Anything beyond that is usually the result of human activity.”

One natural factor that helps contain fire ants to some extent is their inability to survive in desert climates with an insufficient water supply or in areas of the country where ground temperatures drop below freezing for significant stretches of the winter.

Urban areas, however, are another story. A few warm winters in a row allow fire ants to reach an urban area they had not previously inhabited, or they could be brought there via human activity. Once there, the warmth and potential habitats provided around structures such as home and electrical equipment, combined with the water humans bring in for their own use, can sustain fire ant populations in parts of the country where they would not persist in less populated areas.

According to Barr, one example of this urban fire ant problem is Lubbock, Texas, which is outside the area fire ants heavily populate.

Welcome to the first edition in the second year of *“Managing Fire Ants.”* Each month throughout the spring and summer, you will receive information to pass along to your homeowners and readers. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Gini Dietrich at 312-787-7249.

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“Lubbock has had some fire ants for about 20 years now, but recently they have started to see an increase in the problem, with the ants infesting the public parks and other high traffic areas. The dense human activity has allowed the population to develop in an area where they are not otherwise common.”

Indicators of a fire ant problem include the physical presence of ants or fluffy mounds of soil without an opening at the top characteristic of the mounds of other ant species. Fire ant mounds have many entrances and exits along the perimeter of the mound. However, according to Barr, fire ants are often discovered in an even more obvious way.

“People often discover they have fire ants



when they get stung,” says Barr. “They are just working in their garden and an ant aggressively crawls up their arm and stings them. Few ants behave this way, and if the sting forms a small white pustule afterward, it is a very clear indicator of red imported fire ants.”

While their aggressive behavior and ability to charge up vertical surfaces are two distinguishing characteristics of fire ants, several other traits separate them from their fellow ant species. Fire ants are a relatively small species — worker ants generally range from 1/8” to 1/4” long. Their variation in size is another unique quality, as most ant species’ worker ants are uniform in size. Of course, be careful how close you get to investigate the differences in size, or you may wind up with a more painful indication that you do, in fact, have fire ants.

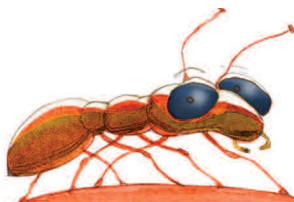
## GARDENING 123

Want to learn more about fire ants, how they live, and how to control them? Visit [www.gardening123.com](http://www.gardening123.com), an online gardening community, for a free interactive lesson on fire ants and fire ant control, brought to you by GardenTech, makers of Over ‘n Out® Fire Ant Killer, an odor-free, dust-free granular insecticide that is guaranteed to provide year-long control of fire ants with one application.



### Highlights of the lesson include:

- The history of fire ants and how they came to be a problem in the United States
- Their biology and life cycle
- Different methods of control
- Review questions, action points, and activities for students



### FIRE ANTECDOTES

Each month, Managing Fire Ants will feature, an interesting or unusual story about an experience with fire ants, straight from the experts who deal with them every day. If you have a “Fire Antecdoter” of your own, please email it to [info@armentdietrich.com](mailto:info@armentdietrich.com).

#### IF YOU CAN’T STAND THE HEAT; TRY LOOKING FOR FIRE ANTS!

By Dr. Charles Barr

Once, I was taking care of a duplex that belonged to two friends of mine who were on their honeymoon. They were both veterinarians, so they had cats, guinea pigs, and all kinds of pets. I walked into the house one day and it was incredibly hot inside, absolutely boiling. I went to check on the pets and saw that the top was off the aquarium where the guinea pigs lived, and one of them was dead. I went outside to check on the air conditioner, which clearly was not working properly, and sure enough, an infestation of fire ants had clogged the relay housing and caused it to stop working. Fire ants are attracted to electrical equipment, and air conditioners are one piece they frequently invade. I was able to clear them out and get it working again, but unfortunately too late for the guinea pig. It was just another example of ways fire ants can cause damage that you normally don’t think about.

### Did you know...

- Fire ants will feed on almost anything including oils, insects, animal carcasses, garbage, seeds and small birds, and animals?
- Fire ants have been known to kill lizards, birds, frogs, quail, and deer?
- Fire ants were accidentally brought to the United States in a shipment from South America in the 1930s?
- The Pacific coast is fertile ground for infestation and is the next on the list for fire ants?
- The queen needs only half a dozen workers to start a new colony, and one can develop several hundred feet away from the previous location almost overnight?

### EXPERT TIP OF THE MONTH

To prevent giving fire ants any extra help in moving to new areas, Dr. Charles Barr recommends people use caution any time they move plants, soil, or other materials that could support fire ants.

*“Any time you are sending, receiving, or just moving any type of nursery stock, make certain to check it for fire ants or signs of fire ant activity, such as mounds in the soil or anything else that looks unusual,” says Barr. “If you find fire ants, treat the area immediately with a pesticide before transporting it.”*

Photographs courtesy of Texas A&M University Department of Entomology. <http://fireant.tamu.edu>

As with all insecticides, please read and follow the use instructions on the package. For more information about insects and/or fipronil, log onto [www.gardentech.com](http://www.gardentech.com)

For more information, please contact Gini Dietrich at (312) 787-7249 or [info@armentdietrich.com](mailto:info@armentdietrich.com).