





Household Ants – ID and Control

Ants are social insects. Most ant colonies are started by a single queen. From this single individual, colonies can grow to anywhere from several hundred to several thousand individuals. Ants normally produce reproductive forms once a year. Colony activity at this time is high, with winged males, queens, and wingless workers in a very active state. The queen and males fly from the colony, mate and shortly thereafter the males dies. The inseminated queen then builds a small nest, lays a few eggs and nurtures them until they hatch. When the adult workers appear, they take over the function of caring for the queen and larvae, building the nest, and bringing in food for the colony. Colonies of some species may persist for twenty years or more.

Ants Size Chart

| Carpenter Ant | Western Thatching Ant | Moisture Ant | Sweet Ant |
|---|---|--|---|
| 6 mm to 13 mm | 7 mm to 9 mm | 3 mm to 5mm | 1.5 mm to 3.5 mm |
|  |  |  |  |

Species: Identification and Concern

The following ant species are common household pests in Washington: Yellow ant (*Acanthomyops* spp.), cornfield ant (*Lasius* spp.) carpenter ant (*Camponotus* spp.), western thatching and other ants (*Formica* spp.), odorous house ant (*Tapinoma sessile*), and pharaoh ant (*Monomorium pharaonis*). All these ants feed on sweet materials, “farm” aphids for the sweet honeydew they discharge, and forage for other insects as well as various household foods. They often invade homes to gather sweets, fats, and other foods eaten by humans.

Carpenter Ants

The color of carpenter ants is variable, with black or red-and-black species being the most common. Workers are large, ranging from 6-13 mm long. Colonies are usually found in logs, trees, houses, and other wooden structures. They are most easily recognized by their size, evenly convex thoracic profile (Figure 1), and small sawdust piles that they throw out of nest areas. These ants are structural pests because they frequently build nests in sound wood.

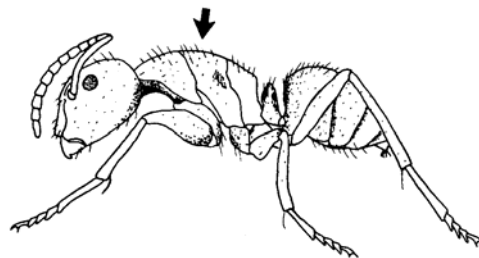


Figure 1. *Camponotus* sp. (carpenter ants) showing evenly convex thoracic dorsum.

Western Thatching

This species is usually two-colored, red and black. However, some species can be all brown or black. They are large ants (7 -9 mm long) and can be distinguished from carpenter ants by a notch or depression in the top of the thorax when viewed from the side (Figure 2). They usually nest in soil or in rotten logs. Many species make a thatch or mound of plant material, frequently grass. They rarely nest in houses.



Figure 2. *Formica* sp. (western thatching ant and other ants) showing notched thoracic dorsum.

Moisture Ants (Yellow, Cornfield and Other Ants) Moisture ants vary in color from yellow to dark brown. The workers are medium size (3 to 5 mm long). Colonies are often found in rotting wood of houses and other structures. They should not be considered structural pests because colonies establish themselves in wood that is already decayed or extremely damp.

Sweet Ants (Odorous House Ant and Pharaoh Ant)

These are small ants (1.5- 3.5 mm long). The odorous house ant varies from brown to black, and the pharaoh ant varies from light yellow to red. Both ants are quite fond of sweets, and they are important pests in homes. Nests may be found under the bark of stumps and logs, in gardens, along walks, and in houses. Odorous house ants are easily recognized by a rotten-coconut-like odor they produce.

Control

An important aspect of ant control is identifying the species involved, thus determining its habitat requirements. If you can do this, the very important task of finding the nest becomes simpler. Killing the workers will provide only temporary relief from the ant pests. The queen will continue to produce more ants in the nest. Finding the nest and destroying the colony is the most effective method of long-term ant control. Household ant pests may be nesting outdoors and invading the house to find food. Nests are commonly found in the following locations: soil around or under the house, beneath sidewalks and driveways, along steps and foundations, under debris and rocks, in stumps or other damp, decayed wood, in trees, and in lawns. It is not uncommon for colonies to establish satellite colonies indoors, while the main or parent colony remains outdoors. Reproductive swarms from outdoor colonies may establish themselves in houses too.

It is important to locate the access points into the house and seal them. Ants often enter the house through door and window trim, holes around plumbing and wiring, etc. Making it difficult to reach their food source will encourage the pests to look elsewhere for food.

Seeing large numbers of winged ants in your house is often a clue that the nest is indoors. However, finding the nest can be quite difficult. Some common nest locations include decaying structural timbers, attics, wall and floor voids, under sinks, behind cabinets, and many similar hard-to-reach places. Ants require moisture to survive, so removing any decaying building

material is one of the first steps toward control. Preventing access to food or putting it in tight containers is also very important.

Indoor Chemical Applications

If you decide to use pesticides indoors, sprays and dusts provide equally effective control, especially if you have found the nest location. An oil-based spray applied as near as possible to the nest or where the ants travel is effective. Put it on nearby surfaces or into cracks or openings that ants can use to enter a room. By using a small paintbrush or applicator you can get the insecticide into the cracks and crevices. Dust application should be light. Limit pesticide treatments to places frequented by ants: baseboards, door moldings, cracks, plumbing pipes, electrical lines in walls, and electrical outlets. Be sure to turn off the power prior to treatments of electrical outlets. Avoid applying pesticides near food, cooking utensils, or storage areas for these items. You may want to employ a reputable pest control operator to do the work for you.

Outdoor Chemical Applications

As with indoor control, locating and treating the outdoor nest provides the best results. Water-based spray, dust, or granule pesticides can be applied directly to the nest or on the soil. Ant-infested trees may be treated by applying the pesticide to the soil at the base of the trees. Broadcast applications and wettable powder sprays are effective ways of treating ants in lawns. A dust or granule killing barrier applied over the ground around foundations or under porches and houses can prevent invasions.

The barrier around foundations should be about three feet wide. Foraging trails that are frequented by the ants may be traced to the colony. The trails leading away from the house and the perimeter should be carefully searched, especially in the proximity of evergreen trees and shrubs. Foraging trails are easiest to locate late at night (11 p.m. - 2 a.m.) when the ants are most active. Pressurized sprays and wettable powders may be used, but dusts have proven to be very effective in most situations.

Pesticides available for treating ant infestations are regularly changing. For current recommendations on treating carpenter and moisture ants, consult <http://pep.wsu.edu/pestsense>. Choose wood-destroying insects.

- Read the entire pesticide label and follow all precautions. Be sure the site (crack and crevice, lawn, wall void, foundation, etc.) and the pest are listed on the label.
- Insecticides often kill non-target insects also and should be selected and used carefully. Avoid applications to edible plants or plants in bloom. Try not to let pesticides drift onto plants that may be used by honeybees or other pollinating insects.
- Depending on soil moisture, temperature, exposure to sun, and microorganisms, pesticides will usually last 2 to 7 days in the area treated.

Commercial pest exterminators or pesticide applicators may have other pesticides available for their use.

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