
Ag. News

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The Answer To Fire Ant Control In Your Yard

Fire Ants are everywhere. We usually see most of our fire ant problems in the spring and early summer, but this year fire ants are doing very well this fall. The warm weather and fall rains have caused them to flourish.

Treat your yards and neighborhood this fall for fire ant relief where needed and be prepared to hit them hard this coming spring and summer. Fire ants love to nest in home lawns, parks and ornamental turf grass areas. At certain times of the year, freshly worked mounds are noticeable and can be unsightly. During the winter months, there's very little ant mounding activity and it is easy to forget they are there.

However, after all of the early fall rainfall, fire ant activity has increased. It is during these times when the ants are very active and can cause more problems especially when everyone wants to be outside after being indoors all winter long. The last thing you want at your outdoor activity is a colony of angry fire ants ready to take over and turn your happy occasion into a miserable one. Did you know that the fire ant is a native of Brazil, and was imported from this country through Mobile, Alabama in the 1930's?

Don't wait until you have serious ant problems. Keep those problems from happening by maintaining a good control program throughout the year. Fire ants travel from yard to yard (they could care less about property lines) and are easily dispersed due to periodic mating flights. Did you know that the fire ant queen lives for 2-5 years and can produce up to 800 eggs per day? Also, remember a high percentage of the mounds in Texas have multiple queens, meaning there is no territorial behavior, resulting in excessive numbers of fire ant mounds per acre or in the homeowners case, per yard! Because most of our mounds have multiple queens, and may be spread over larger areas than we actually see, just sprinkling a product over the top of the mound may not reduce the entire population. In areas where fire ants produce more mounds than you care to treat one at a time (usually more than 4 in a normal yard), or where you spend more time and money on insecticides than you would like to, there is an approach that is less labor-intensive, less toxic and more environmentally friendly. It is called the Two-Step Method, Do-It-Yourself Fire Ant Control method. It is advocated by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. You can obtain a copy of the most recent fire ant management brochure (ENTO-034) by visiting the Texas A&M AgriLife Bookstore and download a copy. <http://www.agrilifebookstore.org/Two-Step-Method-and-Other-Approaches-to-Fire-Ant-p/ento-034.htm>.

The Two-Step Method goes like this:

The first step is to make a semi-annual, spring and fall, broadcast application of a fire ant bait insecticide. There are several fire ant baits available for use in urban areas such as hydramethylnon (Amdro), methoprene (Extinguish), hydramethylnon + methoprene (Extinguish Plus or Amdro Yard Treatment), pyriproxifen (Distance or Esteem), and spinosad (Ferti-Loam "Come and Get It" or Payback fire ant bait). Other products can be found on the official Texas A&M Fire Ant web page, <http://fireant.tamu.edu/controlmethods/products/>.

Please consult the product label and read thoroughly for the broadcast instructions!

Periodic broadcast applications of fire ant baits provide roughly 90 percent suppression of fire ants when properly applied. Baits can be broadcast over small to large areas using suitable hand-held, vehicle-mounted or aerial applicators. Apply a fresh bait product, when ants are foraging, to dry ground when no rain is expected for 24 to 48 hours after treatment. Temperature should be between 65 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Speed and duration of ant suppression differs with the product selected. For instance, broadcast applications of the hydramethylnon + methoprene fire ant bait provides maximum control two to four after application while methoprene fire ant bait (an insect growth regulator product) provides maximum suppression four to nine months after treatment, depending on environmental conditions. Rarely are all colonies eliminated following treatment. Bi-annual applications of the bait product keeps pressure on the fire ant population so each subsequent baiting event is much more effective since less ants are present.

About one week to 10 days after bait application, apply individual mound treatments to “nuisance” ant colonies, such as those in sensitive or high traffic areas. Otherwise, be patient and wait for the bait treatments to work. Even though some bait products are relatively fast-acting, colonies remaining active after six weeks or so have “escaped” the effects of the bait treatment and should be treated with an individual mound treatment. Ant mound treatment products are available as liquid drenches, injectable aerosols, dusts, or granules that are watered in to the mound. Ants are killed only if the insecticide contacts them, so proper application is essential. Colonies migrating into treated areas should be treated as needed. Hundreds of effective individual mound treatment products are available to choose from, and a number of them are considered to be “organic.”

For a two-step program that uses only natural products, broadcast a spinosad bait and then treat mounds with d-limonene or products containing unsynergized pyrethrins or drench with a spinosad liquid product solution. On small properties where a high degree of control is needed, consider using the “Ant Elimination” method (described in ENTO-034) utilizing a granular fipronil product such as Top Choice®, or Taurus G®. These are restricted pesticide products and can only be applied by a licensed pesticide applicator. Only one application is allowed per year preferably early spring.

None of the methods of fire ant control available today eliminate fire ants forever. The bait application may be repeated, if environmental conditions are favorable, whenever sufficient re-invasion occurs. Between these baiting treatments, nuisance mounds should be treated individually. These areas can be re-infested by colonies migrating in from surrounding areas or by newly-mated queens seeking to start new colonies. The rate of re-infestation depends on many factors such as weather, soil type and moisture, but ant populations can be expected to fully recover within 18 months of the last treatment.

Controlling the fire ant situation will be successful only if communities get involved. Your neighborhood association can coordinate a “Community-Wide Fire Ant Management Program” resulting in the treatment of your entire neighborhood each year, usually once in the fall (Late September through October) and once in the spring (Late April through early June), or contracting with a local commercial applicator to perform the treatment(s). Treatment of the entire area is important as re-infestation from nearby untreated areas generally occur.