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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens
by Paul J. Pugliese

"Avoiding Fire Ants with the Two-Step Method"

More than 70 years ago, the red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta*, was accidentally brought into Mobile, Alabama, from South America. It now infests more than 275 million acres, comprising most of nine southeastern states and all of Georgia. Fire ants can travel long distances when newly mated queens land on cars, trucks or trains, or when winged forms are carried by the wind. Shipments of nursery plants or soil from an infested area may relocate entire colonies or nests. Attempts in the late 1960s and early '70s to eradicate the imported fire ant were not successful. The pesticides used, although effective, were no match against the species' capability of re-invading previously treated areas. Today, we have to learn to live with these fiery insects and manage them so that they will be less of a nuisance to pets, livestock, and children.

Before you reach for the insecticides, make sure you know the difference between fire ants and our native ants. If an ant bed is the size of a quarter or a silver dollar, they probably aren't fire ants (unless it's a new colony). These smaller ant colonies are our native ants that actually don't sting and are considered beneficial insects. Recent research suggests that imported fire ants are more commonly found in clear-cut, open fields than our native ants which actually prefer more wooded areas. So, if you live in a house with lots of trees and shade, then you probably have very few, if any imported fire ants to worry about!

You might think that the two-step method for fire ants is a fancy way of avoiding these tiny little nightmares by dancing across your lawn bare-footed. Some might argue that this is an instinctive reaction from Yankees that unknowingly stand on one of those little mounds of dirt. However, there is actually a simple method of keeping fire ants out of your backyard or lawn recommended by University of Georgia entomologists.

Step 1: Once or twice per year, broadcast a bait-formulated insecticide or use an outdoor bait station product as directed on the label. Most popular baits are applied at a rate of 1 to 1½ pounds of product per acre. Periodic broadcast applications of fire ant baits will reduce ant populations about 90 percent when properly applied. Baits can be broadcast easily with hand-held applicators or drop spreaders. The speed and duration of ant suppression differs with the product used. Be sure to read the product label to see how often you need to reapply for maximum control. Most products, if applied in Spring and Fall when ants are actively foraging for food will provide adequate control.

Step 2: Wait several days or more after applying the bait, and then treat nuisance ant colonies (such as those in sensitive or high traffic areas) using an individual mound treatment insecticide. These products are applied as dusts, granules, granules drenched with water after application, liquid drenches, baits, or aerosol injections. Non-chemical methods such as drenching mounds with very hot water also may be used only with extreme caution! Otherwise, be patient and wait for the bait treatment to work. Any nuisance mounds that escaped the effects of the bait treatment, or colonies migrating into treated areas should be treated as needed. In large areas, individual mound treatments may not be feasible and routine broadcast bait treatments alone may provide sufficient control.

NEVER use petroleum products, gasoline, solvents, battery acids, bleaches or ammonia products to treat fire ant mounds. These products, sometime called "home remedies" are extremely dangerous to both you and the environment and ultimately will not provide long-term control. Sprinkling grits or other solid food substances onto fire ant mounds is not effective, despite urban myths that suggest "the ants eat the grits, which then swell and rupture the ants' stomachs." In fact, only the last stage of the developing fire ant is known to digest solid food. Some organic products are registered by the EPA as insecticides and some are very effective. However, they are not necessarily safer than other insecticides, and should be used with care.

Chemical insecticides (both "organic" and synthetic) continue to be the main method of battling fire ants. Insecticides registered by the EPA are considered to pose minimal risk to the user and the environment when used as directed. Carefully follow directions on the product label for the proper method of application, the use of protective clothing, re-entry intervals, and watering practices before and after treatment.

For more information, please view our online publication "Managing Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas" online at <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/B1191.htm>

Paul Pugliese is the Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent for the Cherokee County Cooperative Extension Service, a partnership of The University of Georgia, The U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Cherokee County. (770) 479-0418 http://cescherokee.org/