



10-2006

## **PB1599-Carpenter Ants - Those Big Ants in Your Kitchen and Bathroom**

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_agexdise](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexdise)



Part of the [Entomology Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

"PB1599-Carpenter Ants - Those Big Ants in Your Kitchen and Bathroom," The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, PB1599 10/06(Rev) 07-0070, [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_agexdise/17](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexdise/17)

The publications in this collection represent the historical publishing record of the UT Agricultural Experiment Station and do not necessarily reflect current scientific knowledge or recommendations. Current information about UT Ag Research can be found at the [UT Ag Research website](#).

This Home, Lawn & Garden Insects & Pests is brought to you for free and open access by the UT Extension Publications at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Insects, Pests, Plant Diseases and Weeds by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).



# Carpenter Ants —

Those Big Ants  
in Your Kitchen and Bathroom



# Carpenter Ants —

## Those Big Ants in Your Kitchen and Bathroom

Karen M. Vail, Associate Professor  
Entomology and Plant Pathology

Ever wondered about those big, black ants in your house? You know, the ants you spray every time you see them in the kitchen and bathroom — but they keep coming back. Or, maybe it took the occurrence of a mating flight of the winged forms (usually in the spring or summer) to alert you to their presence, since the worker ants (no wings) are most active at dusk or in the evening. This publication will help you deal with this challenging pest problem.

### The Problem

We have approximately 10 species of carpenter ants in Tennessee. Carpenter ants (*Camponotus* spp.) vary in size and color. The ones commonly found in structures are usually large (1/4 to 1/2 inch) and blackish in color; however, there also are several species that are reddish-orange or reddish-orange and black. Carpenter ants

- Besides being
- an annoyance,
- carpenter ants
- can be destructive and may
- damage wood
- by hollowing it
- out for a nest.

can be an annoyance when they forage indoors searching for food and water. Carpenter ants do not sting because they lack stingers, but they can and will bite if picked up. They have very strong, sharp mandibles that are used to excavate wood (Figure 1), and they defend themselves by grasping the attacker with

their mandibles and spraying formic acid from the end of their abdomens into the wound. A circular fringe of hairs on the end of the abdomen allows the ant to direct the spray.



**Figure 1.** The carpenter ant's sharp mandibles are used for removing wood.

Besides being an annoyance, carpenter ants can be destructive and may damage wood by hollowing it out for a nest. The ants excavate galleries that have a smooth, sandpapered appearance. Shredded fragments of wood similar to coarse sawdust or wood splinters are ejected from the galleries, along with dead ants and bits of other insects that the carpenter ants have eaten. When such accumulations are found, it is a good indication that a nest is nearby.

Homeowners often

complain about bits of the above-mentioned debris regularly falling from a wooden porch that is infested with carpenter ants. Often, however, the excavated sawdust remains hidden behind a wall or in some other concealed area.

Carpenter ants nest in either moist or dry wood, but prefer wood that is moist. Consequently, nests often occur in wood dampened by water leaks, e.g., around sinks, bathtubs, poorly sealed window and door frames, roofs, gutters, or down spouts. When considering likely nesting sites, it is important to remember that carpenter ants often nest in areas other than wood, such as beneath insulation or in false ceilings. Nests are especially common in

moist, hollow spaces — within the wall behind a dishwasher, in a hollow porch column or a shower curtain pole. Some of the smaller carpenter ants are more likely to use a pre-existing void, such as a pith of a stem, a window-shade roller or the top channel of Venetian blinds.

Carpenter ant nests may be located inside or outside the structure. Ants occasionally observed inside the home actually may be nesting outdoors in a tree stump, the hollow of a standing tree, landscape timber or woodpile and may be foraging indoors only in search of food. However, noticing five or more carpenter ants per day in an area of the home where there is no food, such as a bathroom or bedroom, usually indicates an indoor nest. Swarms of winged carpenter ants emerging indoors are another sign of an indoor nest, as is the sighting of ants indoors during winter or on cool or rainy days.

- It is important
- to be able to
- distinguish
- between the
- wood-destroying
- carpenter ants
- and nuisance
- ants.

Flying ants indoors do not always indicate the presence of a parent or main colony. Carpenter ants usually have more than one nest site. One study indicated that the black carpenter ant had two to six nest sites. The parent colony may contain the egg-laying queen, eggs and small larvae, while the satellite colonies usually contain large

larvae, pupae and reproductives (unmated males and females with wings). Thus, carpenter ants may form satellite colonies without a queen inside the home. It is necessary to locate and treat the parent colony to prevent further infestation of satellite colonies in the home.

The potential for damage exists only when carpenter ants are nesting within the structure. While large colonies can potentially weaken studs, joists and other structural timbers, damage is not normally as extensive as that associated with termites. Remember, carpenter ants remove wood to make a space for their nest, while termites eat the wood. Damage produced by smaller carpenter ant colonies may be insignificant, but this can only be determined by locating and exposing the nest area.

### Misidentification can lead to unnecessary pesticide use and cost

It is important to be able to distinguish between the wood-destroying carpenter ants and nuisance ants. There are two other ants that closely resemble the carpenter in size, color and in many of their

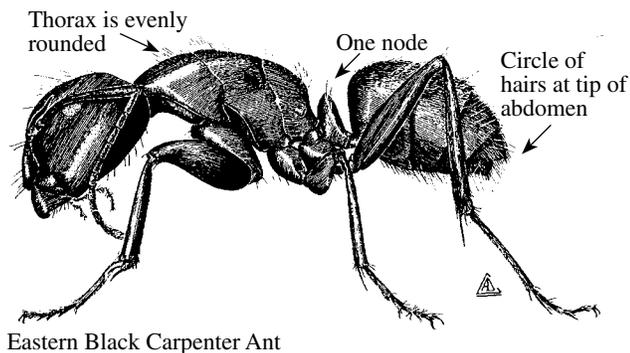
characteristics. A relatively large black ant that is often mistaken for a carpenter ant in Tennessee is the black field ant, *Formica subsericea*. Another *Formica* species, often called the Allegheny mound ant, is reddish-orange and black and resembles several of the carpenter ants found here. Many costly “carpenter ant” jobs are inadvertently sold to homeowners by pest control firms that confuse these two “look-alike” ant groups.

A good hand lens is needed to observe these ants. They all have a one-segmented waist and a circular ring of hairs on the end of the abdomen (Figure 2). View these ants from the side to determine their identity. Carpenter ants have an evenly rounded thorax — the body segment just after the head; *Formica* species have a thorax that appears ridged or uneven in profile. Black field ants commonly form large, low-profile earthen mounds in the yard. Allegheny mound ants often build large, dome-shaped mounds and are common at higher elevations. Unlike carpenter ants, the *Formica* do not establish nests inside buildings, although they may occasionally wander indoors in search of food. *Formica* ants are efficient predators (they eat other insects), and it can be quite amazing to observe them as they drag their victims back to the nest. Often no control is needed for *Formica*. A bait, Combat® Outdoor Ant Killing Granules, sprinkled around the mound can control the colony without affecting other organisms. A mound drench may also be used.

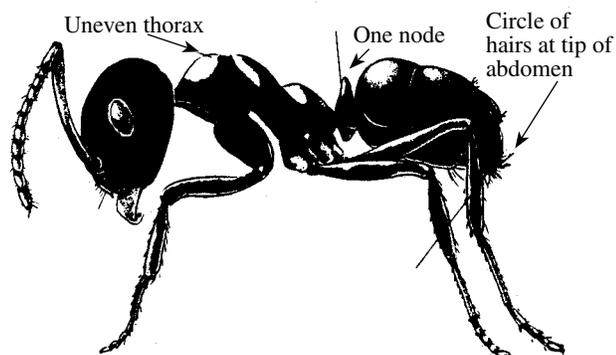
### The Solution

Insecticidal baits have not been consistently effective against carpenter ants, in contrast to other household ants. A more successful control method is to find and treat the nest(s) directly. This is much easier said than done. When attempting to locate a nest, focus your efforts (at least initially) on where most of the ants have been seen. Areas dampened by moisture, e.g., around sinks, dishwashers, chimneys and window or door frames, are especially attractive to carpenter ants; yet, at times, “bone-dry” walls also prove to be nesting sites. Gently tap along baseboards, floor joists, paneling and other suspected wood surfaces with the blunt end of a screwdriver while listening for the hollow sound of damaged wood. A knife or screwdriver blade inserted at this point will penetrate wood that is damaged. If a nest is nearby, the ants may also respond to your tapping by making a “rustling” sound, similar to the crinkling of cellophane.

The general vicinity of a carpenter ant nest can often be located by placing small dabs of honey, maple or corn syrup alone or mixed with crickets



Eastern Black Carpenter Ant



Black Field Ant

**Figure 2.** Carpenter Ant (top) and *Formica* species (bottom). Both ants have a one-segmented petiole and a circular ring of hairs at the end of the abdomen. Notice the carpenter ant has an evenly rounded thorax (body region behind the head) and the *Formica* species has an indentation in the thorax when viewed from the side. Carpenter ants can nest in moist wood in houses and *Formica* species may enter houses in search of food. Figures reprinted with permission from PCT Field Guide for the Management of Structure-Infesting Ants. *Formica* ant drawing by Kathy Brown-Wing.

or mealworms in the area(s) where ants have been seen. Carpenter ants feed more on proteins — crickets or mealworms — in the spring and more on carbohydrates — honeys and syrups — in the fall. (Place the “bait” onto small squares of wax paper or the back, non-sticky side of masking tape pieces to make clean-up easier.) The best times to set out bait are when carpenter ants are most active — late at night, just after dark or just before sunrise. After the ants have fed on the bait, follow them on their journey back to their nest. A red lens on a flashlight may allow observation of the ants without disturbing them. Be patient — eventually the

ants will disappear behind a baseboard, cabinet or into some other concealed location, such as behind a wall, a window/door frame or a porch column. Treat behind walls and other hidden spaces where ants are entering by injecting into existing cracks and/or drilling small (1/8 inch) holes and puffing an insecticide dust like boric acid to the suspected nest areas. Professional pest control firms have “dusters” specifically designed for this purpose. Professionals also have many more options when choosing a pesticide. Homeowners wishing to perform this treatment themselves can purchase boric acid in a ready-to-use “puffer,” or attempt to make one using an empty, dry, narrow-tipped plastic container. With a little luck, the insecticide dust will disperse in the hidden void and, through contact or grooming, kill the ants. If you suspect the nest is in a wall, drill and treat at least 3 to 6 feet on either side of where ants are entering to maximize the chances of contacting the nest. As is true for most ants, carpenter ants prefer to travel along wires, pipes and edges; therefore, it is beneficial also to inject dust into any openings around plumbing pipes and behind (not inside) the junction boxes of electrical light switches and receptacles. Never apply insecticides directly into junction boxes or spray liquids around electrical outlets. Turn off the main circuit breaker as an additional safety precaution.

As noted earlier, carpenter ants seen in the home may actually be nesting outdoors and foraging indoors for food and water. If outdoor nests are suspected, inspect for ants around the foundation and siding of the house at night with a flashlight.

Pay particular attention to areas around doors, windows, decks, edges, cracks and where utility pipes and wires enter the structure. Also, observe areas where tree limbs touch the house. The bait previously described can be used to trace these ants back to their nest. Ants will forage randomly; but upon locating a food source, they will usually return to the nest in a straight line — unless they are following a guideline such as a root or a garden hose. Observe the foragers as they return to the nest. If possible, determine the location of ants over a distance of 3 feet. Once the location of the ants is determined, visualize a straight line in the direction they were foraging. This should lead you right to the nest. You may end up following the ants out into

- Carpenter
- ants seen in
- the home may
- actually be nest-
- ing outdoors
- and foraging
- indoors for food
- and water.

Carpenter ants are considered a wood-destroying organism and are reportable on an inspection form should you decide to sell your house. If resale of your house is a concern, then use a professional pest control operator.

the yard, possibly to a nest located in a stump, dead tree limb, rotten fence post, telephone pole or under a log or landscaping timber. Once an outdoor nest is discovered, treatment can be performed by spraying, foaming or dusting it with an insecticide labeled for this use.

If you are hesitant to apply insecticides, but want to perform control procedures yourself, then baiting with less toxic compounds may be the answer. Insecticidal baits for carpenter ant control have had mixed results. Anecdotal information from researchers indicates a one percent boric acid solution in a 10 percent sugar water solution has been successful in controlling the Florida carpenter ant in structures. Also hydramethylnon (Combat® Outdoor Ant Killing Granules) baits may be effective when applied outdoors as granulars along foraging trails. Do not apply fast-acting sprays near baits because spraying could kill the foragers needed to take the bait back to the nest.

Professionals have access to baits, such as Max-free Carpenter Ant Bait Gel and others; but even with these baits, acceptance and control has been variable. Insecticidal baits do not always provide control as effective as that from other options, and the potential for structural damage needs to be considered as long as carpenter ants are active.

### Calling a Professional

Eliminating carpenter ants can be very challenging. If you do not wish to attempt control yourself, you may want to call a professional. Pest management firms approach carpenter ant problems differently. Research from the Pacific Northwest has shown a perimeter treatment (the wall/ground

interface, entry points and active ants) of Termidor (fipronil), which is a slow-acting insecticide, has been very successful in controlling carpenter ant species found in that area. Pest management professionals in Tennessee may use this same approach. Some professionals may try to locate the nest(s) and treat only in suspected areas; whereas other companies take a less-directed approach, opting instead to drill and dust as many potential nesting sites as possible. Other companies have been successful with professional baits. Companies not using a bait or Termidor may also apply a perimeter (spray) treatment of a faster-acting insecticide around the foundation of the house to temporarily prevent re-invasion. **Caution:** Applying a perimeter treatment of a fast-acting insecticide to a home where ants are nesting indoors may force the ants to forage inside only, thereby making them more of a nuisance. The approach that should **not** be taken is simply to use a faster-acting spray each month where carpenter ants are seen.

### Preventing Future Problems

The following measures will help prevent future problems:

- Correct roof leaks, plumbing leaks and other moisture problems that attract carpenter ants.
- Clip back tree limbs and branches touching the roof or siding of the house. These serve as “bridges” nests in dead portions of trees and the structure.
- Seal cracks and openings in the foundation, especially where utility pipes and wires enter from outside.
- Because firewood is a prime nesting location for carpenter ants, never store it in the garage. Stack wood away from the foundation and elevate it off the ground.

For specific pesticide suggestions, see UT Extension PB1690 Insect and Plant Disease Control Manual at <http://eppserver.ag.utk.edu/redbook/sections/structural.htm>

Adapted from: Mike Potter. 1996. “Eliminating Carpenter Ants,” Kentucky Pest News, May 12.

---

### **Precautionary Statement**

To protect people and the environment, pesticides should be used safely. This is everyone's responsibility, especially the user. Read and follow label directions carefully before you buy, mix, apply, store, or dispose of a pesticide. According to laws regulating pesticides, they must be used only as directed by the label.

### **Disclaimer**

This publication contains pesticide recommendations that are subject to change at any time. The recommendations in this publication are provided only as a guide. It is always the pesticide applicator's responsibility, by law, to read and follow all current label directions for the specific pesticide being used. The label always takes precedence over the recommendations found in this publication.

Use of trade or brand names in this publication is for clarity and information; it does not imply approval of the product to the exclusion of others that may be of similar, suitable composition, nor does it guarantee or warrant the standard of the product. The author(s), the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture and University of Tennessee Extension assume no liability resulting from the use of these recommendations.

---

Visit the UT Extension Web site at  
<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/>