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

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service
Carpenter Ants — Those Big Ants in Your Kitchen and Bathroom
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-black. Carpenter ants 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.

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, sandpaped 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. There are two other ants that closely resemble the wood-destroying carpenter ants and nuisance ants. There are two other ants that closely resemble the wood-destroying carpenter ants.

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.
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. For these reasons, it is best to set out bait 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 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

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.

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