

Least-toxic Control of Indoor and Outdoor Ants

Ants can be divided into three groups for the purpose of pest control: indoor, outdoor, and wood destroying.

INDOOR ANTS

Pharaoh ants, small and reddish-brown in color, are the most common ant species to nest indoors. Conventional pesticides, in addition to their potential human health risks, have been shown to cause pharaoh ant colonies to disperse and split up into multiple colonies, making them even more difficult to control.

Prevention

Ants, other than Pharaoh ants, observed indoors are probably coming from outside. They usually follow distinct chemical trails that they have left to easily find their way from their point of entry to their food source. Follow the ant trail, identify the points of entry into your home, and seal them out. If you don't have a clear ant trail, place small pieces of cardboard or wax paper with syrup or a high-protein treat (depending on your ant type) out at night. In the morning, there should be a nice, thick ant trail leading to their doorway(s) into your home.

- Caulk or screen all entry points. Drawing a solid line with regular chalkboard chalk, putting down lines of cayenne and black pepper as repellants, or using toothpaste, petroleum jelly or duct tape as sealants will work temporarily. For permanent sealing, use silicone caulking.
- Clean up and remove food sources. Keep kitchen counters, stove tops and floors clean, put garbage in tightly sealed containers and empty it daily, and thoroughly rinse recyclables.
- Store sugars, grains and pet food in glass jars with seals or gaskets and plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Ants can climb up the threads of screw-top jars and get in if there is no gasket or liner.
- Place pet bowls in moats – a pie tin filled with plain soapy water and the food bowl placed in the middle can be effective in preventing ant access, but be sure your pet won't drink the soapy water.
- Ants feed on "honeydew," a sweet substance produced by insects that feed on plant sap, such as aphids and scale. Control these insects and cut branches back from your house to prevent ant problems.

Control

- Soapy water in a spray bottle or on a sponge will kill individual ants and erase the chemical trail that lines of ants follow.

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- Apply one of the various, commercially available sticky barriers to foundation walls or the legs of tables or plant stands where ant problems are brewing.
- Use a food attractant placed in a dirt-filled, clay flowerpot to lure the ants away from your house; once they've moved in, kill them with boiling hot water.
- Desiccating dusts, such as diatomaceous earth and pure amorphous silica aerogel, kill ants by causing them to lose moisture and die. Diatomaceous earth must be garden/food grade. Place the dust in wall voids or cracks and then seal them, or sprinkle powder lightly around the edges of carpeted areas or brush it into the carpet, wait three days, and then vacuum. In cracks, the dusts can be effective for many years, as long as they are kept dry. Once-a-year applications to carpets should suffice. When using either desiccating or boric acid dust, always wear a dust mask and goggles and cover any electronic equipment that could suffer dust damage. Do not use diatomaceous earth if you have lung problems.
- For a quick fix, sprinkle corn meal around the outside of your home. It will make the ants thirsty, they will go for water, swell up and explode.
- Boric acid products, such as Drax™, are effective against Pharaoh ants. Create your own bait by mixing one teaspoon 99% pure boric acid with 1/3 cup apple-mint jelly. Place small dabs of bait in areas where you have seen ant activity and along established ant trails, but do not block the trails. Put out one to three dabs per 25 square feet, checking the baits every 1-3 days, and replacing any that has been eaten or adding a few drops of water to those that have dried out. Always be cautious with boric acid and keep away from children and animals.

OUTDOOR ANTS

Ants outdoors are normally not a problem. These ants actually benefit us by preying on flea and fly larvae, recycling organic matter, and aerating soil.

Prevention

- If outdoor ants do become a nuisance, eliminate their food source by cleaning all spills and storing garbage in tightly fitted containers.
- Do not leave pet food out for long periods of time. When it is exposed, place the bowl in a tray of water. This moat will deter ants. Adding soap to this water will be more effective, but be sure your pet won't drink it.

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- Ant populations may bloom because of the surrounding vegetation or groundcover. Cleaning and cutting back vegetation will make it less attractive to ants.

Control

- Ants feed on “honeydew,” a sweet substance produced by insects that feed on plant sap, such as aphids and scale. Controlling these insects may help control your ant problem.
- Soapy water can be used to drench outside nests, killing some ants and forcing the others to relocate.
- Drive ants out of flowerpots and outdoor nests by flooding them repeatedly.
- To directly control outdoor ants, digging up the colony will destroy it. This is very labor intensive. You can also pour boiling or soapy water down the hole of the nest.
- Only if the nest is located in a dry area should boric acid be used. Sprinkle it around the openings. Always be cautious with boric acid and keep away from children and animals.

References

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