

Fire ant control may include doing nothing

There are a number of options in controlling fire ants and that sometimes includes doing nothing.

Fire ant colonies consist of the brood (eggs, larvae and pupae) and adult ants. The adults include winged males, winged females, one or more egg producing queen and workers. The winged males and females mate in spring or early summer after a rainy period. Males die shortly after mating. Newly mated females can fly as far as twelve miles from the nest (or farther in the wind). After landing, mated females shed their wings and begin digging chambers in which they lay eggs to start a new colony.

A single queen can lay over 2000 eggs per day! She can live an average of six to seven years. The average fire ant colony contains 100,000 to 500,000 workers. Fire ant mounds can reach densities of 200 to 800 per acre.

You should now begin to understand why fire ants are difficult to control. Where they don't pose a direct threat to human health, the best management practice may be to leave them alone.

Homeowners may have to find a tolerable level. Waging war on this insect can be expensive and requires a long-term commitment. There is no single, universal solution to controlling fire ants. A one-time treatment may make the problem worse. In areas where native ants and fire ants have been reduced or eliminated with insecticides, reinfestation by fire ants into these treated areas is rapid because they out compete other ant species.

A balanced approach to fire ant management is recommended. Those mounds that pose no threat to humans should be left alone. Instead target specific mounds such as those close to buildings and walkways.

When treating single mounds with contact insecticides such as Orthene, it's critical to treat when the queen and brood are close to the surface, which is between 70°F to 85°F. When using fire ant baits such as Amdro, it's important to apply the bait when the ants are foraging for food. They are most actively doing that between 70°F to 85°F. Actively foraging ants will pick up the bait and carry it into the nest within minutes. That's important because baits tend to quickly go rancid and then are no longer attractive to ants. When using season-long control products such as insecticides containing fipronil, it's a must to achieve uniform coverage of the area. Always read and follow the label precautions and directions when using any insecticide.

Where fire ants pose no threat in out-of-the-way areas on your property, consider the option of leaving them alone.

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