

Bug-Wise

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Indoor Ant Problems: There are many different species of ants that can occur inside homes. Treatments for indoor ant problems vary considerably, depending on which species is involved. Consequently, the first step in dealing with an indoor ant problem is to collect some of the ants and have them identified. The following discussion addresses approaches to the control of odorous house ant, which is one of the more common, and more difficult to control, species of home invading ants.

Odorous House Ants: Odorous house ants (OHAs) are one of the most common species of ants encountered indoors. As their name suggests, they have a distinctive odor, especially when crushed. OHAs are easily confused with argentine ants, but because argentine ants tend to displace other ant species, OHAs are less common in areas infested with argentine ants.

OHA are most commonly found in the kitchen/pantry area, but they can occur anywhere in the house where there is an attractive food source. They are sweet-feeding ants and are especially attracted to sugar, sweetened cereals, syrup, etc, but they will also feed on other types of food. They are also found around pet feeding areas or areas where pet food is stored. These ants primarily nest outdoors and indoor infestations are likely to be linked to outdoor colonies. Foraging ants lay a chemical trail from the colony to the food source, and with a little patient effort, these trails can often be identified and followed back to the nesting site.

This pest has the habit of moving its nest site every few weeks, which can make control more challenging. Nest sites may be found under boards, stones or other objects laying on the ground, under mulch in flower beds, in stacks of firewood, bricks or other objects, under shingles or siding siding, behind ivy or other vines on external walls, behind brick veneer, in wall voids, and in many other locations. Actually, a 'colony' of OHAs often consist of a main colony, or nest site, and many satellite nest sites, all of which have queens and brood of their own, but are interconnected by foraging trails. Often some of the satellite nest sites will be located inside the house, while others are located outside. Because they are sweet-feeding ants, OHAs will readily take sweet baits, especially liquid baits, and baits can be useful in their control.

Short-term control of odorous house ants can be as simple as locating their trail and wiping it away with a damp, soapy cloth. Without their scent trail, the ants lose their way to the food source, and are forced to forage elsewhere. This is most effective when an outdoor colony has only recently established a single foraging trail into the home. However, if there are heavy populations in or around the home, they will likely return eventually, especially if they have readily available routes into the home. **Long-term control of odorous house ants can be quite challenging, requiring a combination of methods and much persistence and patience.** Following are some key points to keep in mind when attempting to control OHAs.

- The best and surest way to eliminate an infestation of OHAs is to locate and treat their nest sites or colonies. This is done by looking for their trails and following them back to their source. It is usually impossible to locate all colonies, but this is an important first step. When a colony is located it should be thoroughly treated with an appropriately labeled residual insecticide. Be sure to read and follow label directions. Insecticides that are labeled for outdoor use may not be labeled for use indoors.

- Examples of insecticides that may be used to treat outdoor ant colonies include: Cyfluthrin (Bayer Advanced Home, Carpenter Ant and Termite Killer Plus) permethrin (Spectracide Carpenter Ant and Termite Killer), or cyhalothrin (Triazicide Soil and Turf Insect Killer).

-Examples of insecticides that can be used to treat colonies of ants indoors include aerosol sprays containing active ingredients such as: prallethrin + tralomethrin (Hot Shot Roach and Ant Spray is one example), or pyrethrins + PBO + permethrin (Spectracide Bug Stop is one example), or ready-to-use trigger pump sprays containing active ingredients such as bifenthrin (Ortho Home Defense Perimeter and Indoor Insect Killer is an example) or tralomethrin (No Pest Home Insect Control is an example).

- The next step is to eliminate attractive food sources. If pet food bowls are the cause of the problem, this can be as simple as limiting the amount of time pets are allowed to eat, before removing the food, rather than giving the pet, and consequently the ants, free access to the food. But it can also necessitate making a thorough search of the home to identify and remove food sources, or to store them in ant-proof containers.

- It is also helpful to identify and seal points where ants can potentially enter the home. It is usually impossible, and impractical, to seal all such entry points, but, sealing points where trails have been observed entering the house can help divert foragers to other, outside food sources. When sealing cracks and entryways for ant control, keep in mind that it is important to retain adequate ventilation of the home for health and safety reasons.

- Limbs of trees or shrubs that touch the exterior of the house provide convenient travel ways for foraging ants to enter. Thus keeping limbs and branches pruned away from the house can aid in control.

- Because this pest thrives on honeydew produced by ornamental pests, such as aphids, scales, and whiteflies, controlling these pests can aid in ant control. Likewise, because ants tend and protect these honeydew producers, controlling ants can aid in control of the plant pests.

- Because OHA readily nests in the moist, protected environment provided by organic mulch, keeping mulch away from the foundation wall of the house aids greatly in control. Where feasible, pea gravel or some other non-plant based mulch should be used in the area immediately adjacent to the foundation. This also aids in preventing termites from gaining an entry point.

- OHAs are not as easily controlled with baits as are certain other ant species, such as fire ants. Baits can be useful in the control of OHAs, but they take time to work, usually several weeks, or even months, and the bait must be kept fresh and replenished regularly. The goal is to keep feeding them bait as long as the ants are foraging on it. Traditional insecticides should not be used in areas where baits are being used, because they tend to repel ants from the area. Likewise, the trails should not be disturbed; just keep checking and replenishing the bait. Examples of baits that can be useful against OHAs include: liquid sweet baits containing borax, such as Terro Ant Killer. Other baits include Hot Shot Max Attrax Ant Bait, Gourmet Liquid Ant Bait or MaxForce FG, which is a finely ground granular bait. When using baits, it is important to supply bait to all locations where ants are foraging. If ants are being seen in the kitchen, den, and a bedroom, bait all three locations. Appropriate baits should also be placed outside where foraging trails are observed.

- When outdoor populations are heavy, treatments of residual insecticide applied to a three to eight foot wide band around the perimeter of the house can be helpful in obtaining control. The objective of these perimeter treatments is to control any colonies that may be located in the area and control, or discourage, foraging workers from colonies located further away from the home. Examples of insecticides labeled for such perimeter treatments include: carbaryl (Sevin Concentrate Bug Killer), cyhalothrin (Triazicide Soil and Turf Insect Killer), and permethrin (Hi-Yield 38 Plus, Turf, Termite, and Ornamental Insect Concentrate). Read and follow label directions carefully. Some labels allow treatment of a portion of the outer wall of the home, while others do not.

- Hire a professional pest control company. Obviously this is one approach to controlling an infestation of odorous house ants. Most companies have experienced technicians who know and understand how to deal with ant problems. However, don't expect an overnight solution. The technician will still have to use the methods discussed above and it can take time, and several repeat visits to obtain results. However, he will be better equipped to drill and treat wall voids if such treatments are necessary. Another treatment available to the licensed professional, but not to homeowners, is to apply a perimeter treatment of Termidore (fipronil), around the outside of the building. This involves applying a band of spray, one foot up the side of the building and one foot out from the base of the building. This treatment has proven to be especially helpful when combined with the other methods previously discussed. Homeowners who engage a pest control company to control OHAs may wish to inquire about this treatment, or similar perimeter treatments utilizing products containing the active ingredient bifenthrin.

The brand names mentioned in the publication are used as examples only. No endorsement of these products is intended. Other appropriately labeled products containing similar active ingredients should provide similar levels of control. Always read and follow the insecticide label.