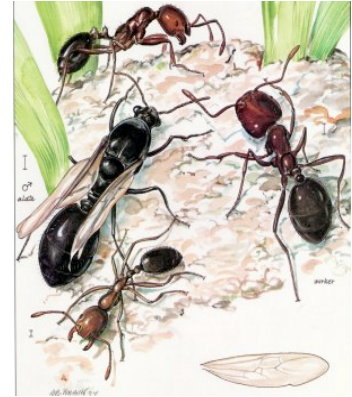


The ABC's of Coping with Fire Ants

an fact sheet from Toxic Free NC

Red imported fire ants have crept North into the Carolinas over the past decade to become a nasty little sign of summer's arrival. With fire ant mounds popping up in yards, playgrounds and ball fields across the state, it may seem like we're all doomed to suffer their bites, but fear not! These tips can help you manage fire ants *without* resorting to toxic chemicals, so you can enjoy a long hot summer without the sting of fire ant bites...or toxic pesticides!



Unfortunately, fire ants will always be around. Getting rid of every last one is not really possible, so keep things in perspective. With a little common sense and precaution, you can prevent fire ant bites, and discourage them from making a home in high-traffic areas.

A) Mind the mounds! Fire ant mounds look like hills of loosened soil. Disturbing a mound will cause the ants to come out and attack – they'll climb up the nearest thing, most likely your leg, and start biting. Ow!

- Keep an eye out for ant mounds when walking, picnicking or camping in grassy areas.
- Mark ant mounds with flags or sticks so that others won't accidentally disturb them.
- When working outside in areas with fire ant infestations, don't wear sandals! Wear boots, or tuck your pant legs into your socks to prevent fire ant bites.

B) Don't be hospitable. A few ideas to make your yard less friendly to fire ants:

- Fix leaky pipes and improve drainage around your home—red imported fire ants are less likely to nest where they can't get water every day.
- Your garbage is like a buffet for fire ants, so keep trash and recycling areas tidy: empty and clean bins often, rinse containers, and replace trash cans with holes in them.
- Clean up after Fido! Fire ants like to eat the fly larvae found in pet droppings.
- Mow often. Fire ants are less likely to nest where there's frequent disturbance.
- Let other ant species thrive. Many native ant species are fierce competitors of fire ants, so letting them be is a good way to keep fire ants in check. Don't use pesticides around the house that might harm native ants, and choose diverse native landscaping to provide shelter for native insects.

C) Least-toxic fire ant control. Be careful and patient when trying any of these least-toxic control options for fire ants. Wear long pants tucked into socks and closed-toe shoes, and dust your shoes and pant legs with baby powder or cornstarch to prevent ants from crawling up.

- Flood the nest with hot water. This cheap and non-toxic solution will kill some fire ants and annoy the rest enough to make them move someplace else. Add a squirt of non-toxic dish soap to 2-3 gallons of very hot water, and slowly pour the water into the mound. This works better for newer mounds, and in the cooler morning and evening hours when ants are closer to the surface. You may have to repeat this a few times to finish the job.
- Make your own fire ant bait with borax powder. You can try a sweet mix, a protein mix, or a combination:
Sweet mix, may work better in the Spring and Fall:
4 tsp. borax
1 cup sugar
3 cups water
Protein mix, may work better in the Summer:
1 tsp. borax
1/2 can of cat food (or 2 Tbsp. peanut butter)
Soak cotton balls or bits of sponge in mixture and put the bits (or the cat food mixture) in a plastic or glass container with holes punched in the lid. Place the container within a few feet of the fire ant mounds, but not on top of them. Don't let pets or kids play around the baits unattended.
- If home remedies haven't worked, try a least-toxic commercial product. Look for the active ingredients boric acid, d-limonene (citrus oil), pine oil, or spinosad. Use them sparingly and take care to follow all label instructions, as these products can irritate the skin or nasal passages or harm non-pest species.
- Try the "yellow flag system". This method was created by William Bailey of Elizabeth City Schools, and involves marking fire ant mounds with yellow flags and applying a granular bait pesticide sparingly around the flag area over several days or weeks. Find a full description of Mr. Bailey's method in our Winter 2004 newsletter at www.toxicfreenc.org.

Good luck, and remember to mind the mounds!