

## Pest Busters #8 – Ants

I don't really consider ants a pest in the garden, but in the house they can be a problem. In this article we will be talking about the run of the mill, small, black ant. I have no experience with fire ants, but hear that they can be vicious and quite a nuisance. Contact a local exterminator or county extension office if you do indeed have a fire ant problem.

As I said, in the garden, ants can be very beneficial. They help to aerate the soil and in many cases, they help with pollination as they move from bloom to bloom on some plants. They also eat the eggs and larvae of fleas and other garden pests. Some species of ants are attracted to certain plants. The plant provides food and shelter to the ant and the ant will fend off any predators of that plant. So as with everything in nature, there is a balance, and all creatures, no matter how much of a nuisance to humans, can be useful and necessary in the balance of nature.

If you notice a large congregation of ants on one particular plant, you can be sure that you may also have an aphid problem. In a way, the ants are beneficial, alerting you to the fact that you have aphids. If this is the case, please refer to my aphid article for ways to get rid of aphids, and in all likelihood the ants will disappear once the aphids are gone.

Ants can also be attracted to scale. I have not written an article about scale yet, but when I do, I will update you with that information.

If you find an ant mound in the garden, and the ants are truly causing a problem for you or your plants, I would suggest starting with the simplest and least offensive method to get rid of them; boiling water. Pour a pot of boiling water down the ant mound wait a few minutes and repeat. This may also kill any plants that might be right up against the mound, so be careful if plants are nearby. If you find that the ants scatter too quickly, you can cover the mound with a container and pour the boiling water around the container. Ants will climb into the container and you can kill them by pouring more boiling water into the container.

If you live in a dry climate with sandy soils, you may notice more ants in your landscape. You can help get rid of ants by sprinkling diatomaceous earth in and around the mound. Break the top of the ant hill up so the ants are more exposed and sprinkle liberally on the mound. This will only work if it will be dry for several days. Make sure it is horticulture grade and not the kind used in swimming pools.

I've found that soils rich in organic matter are less likely to have a huge population of ants. I don't know if there is any scientific proof to this, but I have noticed that parts of my landscape that are sandy tend to have a lot more ants than areas that are full of clay or good compost (organic matter). You may not be able to improve the soil in your entire landscape, but you can help control the ants in your garden by applying lots of compost every year and turning the soil once in a while. The added bonus; your plants will do better in the long run.

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Now that we have tackled ants in the landscape, let's talk about getting them out of your home. This is always a problem for us in the spring time. If you follow these few simple steps, you can get rid of them pretty easily

1. Seal up as many cracks in your home as possible. Start with the windows and doors and then look for less conspicuous cracks around the foundation of your home.
2. Kill any lone ants you might find in your home. These ants are most likely scouts, searching for food. So don't let them return to the nest as they will most likely bring more ants back with them.
3. Keep your home clean. Make sure counters are wiped off at all times and no dirty dishes are left in the sink. Wipe down the sink so that no standing water is left in the bottom. Confine foods to the kitchen or dining area only and vacuum these areas twice a week, or more often if needed.
4. Purchase sticky traps or ant traps and place them behind appliances and under cabinets away from pets and children. You can make your own ant bait by mixing boric acid with sugar water. Mix 1 cup water with 2 cups sugar and 2 tablespoons boric acid. It's important to get the ratio right so that you have a better chance of killing the whole colony. Put the poisoned sugar water inside a small glass jar that has a lid. Punch holes in the lid big enough for ants to get into. Smear some plain sugar water on the outside of the jar and wait. If they are not taking the sugar water bait, try a mixture of equal parts peanut butter and borax instead. Homemade bait methods, could take several weeks to several months to work. Put the bait next to the trail, not across the trail, so that the ants will take the bait back to the colony. Before using a bait like this, make sure you have cleaned your house thoroughly so that you don't accidentally attract a new colony of ants. Wait until you have a definite ant problem before putting down bait and only put the bait where you are actually seeing ants congregate. Again, keep away from pets and children. Since boric acid is toxic, please make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions for handling it and always wear gloves and wear a mask if exposed to the powder for a long period.
5. Sprinkle diatomaceous earth, salt or powder that contains talc under cabinets where ants frequent and around the perimeter of your home during dry weather. All these ingredients will dry out the body of an ant, so they generally will not even cross a powder of any kind.
6. Ants have a keen sense of smell and do not like the scents of cinnamon, vinegar, cloves, peppermint, cayenne pepper, black pepper, or bay leaves. I generally clean the floor with a 50/50 solution of white vinegar and water and don't usually have a problem with ants when I do.
7. If you can't seal up all the holes where ants are visibly coming in, try this spray to repel them. Mix 1 teaspoon of rubbing alcohol, 1 teaspoon of dish soap, and 1 quart of water. Add it to a spray bottle, shake until sudsy and spray on any areas where ants have been known to frequent. You can also use this same spray on other pests as it will kill on contact. Just make sure you use soap and not a detergent. Real soaps include ivory and Dr. Bronner's Castile Soap. I use Dr.

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- Bronner's for lots of things and it has an added effect of the peppermint smell, which also wards off the ants.
8. Vacuum any ants you might find in the house and add a little talcum powder, cornstarch or borax to the vacuum bag to kill them. Empty the bag immediately in an outside trash can. If you use a bagless vacuum, just sprinkle a little of the talcum powder, cornstarch or borax in the catch container before you begin vacuuming. Better yet, if you use a vacuum that uses water as a filter, there is no need to add anything as they will drown in the water, if not from the trauma of being vacuumed up in the first place.
  9. If you have pets, try not to keep pet foods out all day. If this is a problem, place the food dish inside another dish of water. The water will create a moat that the ants cannot cross. Check often for dead ants and change water immediately when you see them.

You may be able to find more ant control methods on the Internet, but these are the ones I have personally found to be useful for me and my region.

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