

Garden Column  
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## Ants

“Ants are so much like human beings as to be an embarrassment. They farm fungi, raise aphids as livestock, launch armies into war, use chemical sprays to alarm and confuse enemies, capture slaves, engage in child labor, exchange information ceaselessly. They do everything but watch television.” – Lewis Thomas (physician, poet, essayist, administrator, educator, policy advisor, and researcher.)

So why write about these interesting insects in a garden column? Because they are among the most numerous and misunderstood insects in the garden and our homes. Always there, but what are they doing there? This has led to a spate of comments about ants from gardeners these past growing seasons that have ranged from puzzlement to hostility. Ants can be both beneficial and a nuisance in the garden and around our homes. I can't do justice to these interesting little critters in a few words so following is a thumbnail discussion of ants in garden.

The comments usually begin in the spring when ants are crawling over peony blossoms. Ants tend to cluster on the buds in great numbers so therefore, they must be doing damage. What are they doing? This is where “ant confusion” begins to occur. Some very “learned” references state the ants are actually helping the peony buds to open as if unlocking the door to the garden. In a sense they are as they feast on the sugars being produced by the potential flower. They are not hurting or helping the actual budding process but are protecting the bud from other harmful insects such as caterpillars while feeding on bud secretions. The buds would open regardless of the presence or absence of ants. A negative side to the presence of ants on peonies, and other flowers, is they can become so numerous that they are perceived as an infestation that must be dealt with.

Some gardeners notice small ant hills in an otherwise perfect lawn and try to rid these “unsightly” lumps by stomping on them and dispersing the soil. This is a fruitless exercise as the ants will simply rebuild their mounds in a day or so. Despite the appearance of the excavated soil on top of the grass, these field ant nests typically do not cause any lasting damage to the grass. The turf may look like it is being undermined but this is not likely; however, if large enough they may cause damage to mower blades.

It may not be necessary to treat ants in the lawn. If the nest is not intrusive in its appearance or cause mower problems, then ignore them. If the nest is troublesome, treat with a granular insecticide labeled for ants found in turf. These insecticides can be found at Bloomers. Pouring hot water on the nest has been suggested but it does not work nor does burning or destroying the nests with gasoline or lighter fluid.

Other gardeners have erroneously commented that ants are crawling over dead plants and therefore must have killed them. Not true. Ants are there because another agent such as a fungus, insect, or hoe killed the plant and the ants are there to harvest the soft plant tissue.

Rather than seen as pests, ants should be considered as partners in gardening. Interestingly, ants are seed dispersers, especially of woodland spring wildflowers such as bleeding hearts, trout lilies, Dutchman's breeches, and most violets. Some scientists claim that these plants appear to

have adjusted the time of flowering and fruiting to take advantage of high ant activity early in the year. These plants tend to have attractants that are rich in lipids that ants take back to their nest and feed to their larvae, discarding (planting) the undamaged seed on the nest's waste heap.

Besides peonies, ants also protect other plants from harmful insects. Ants are attracted to the nectar found on stems or sepals of numerous plants but not the nectar in flowers used by pollinators. Ants patrol these plants and disturb other insects by attacking them or by interrupting feeding, egg laying, courtship or molting.

Ants act as a sort of Swiss Guard to protect the caterpillars of some butterfly groups. The caterpillars produce a sweet substance (honeydew) that attracts ant protectors. The ants farm the caterpillars and sometimes even carry them into ant nests to complete development.

Aside from their protection activities ants crawling around plants act as pollinators, carrying pollen from one flower to the next, much like a bee, fly or butterfly.

Among the ant "pests" in the garden are fire ants which we, fortunately, don't have this far north. However, ants "farming" aphids can be a problem. Aphids produce a honeydew that ants collect and take back to their nests. Ants will actually protect their "aphid cows" from natural predators. However, aphids are harmful to plants and the "farming" of them by ants may prove to be detrimental to plants. The solution is to get rid of the aphids hopefully encouraging the ants to move their farming operations elsewhere. This can be done by properly applying an insecticide, available at Bloomers or by concocting an organic insecticide. A tablespoon of dishwashing soap in a gallon of water or a whole garlic bulb "mashed" in two cups of water than place the concoction in a gallon of water. Plants must be sprayed with the homemade remedies about every 5 to 7 days while a good commercial insecticide need only be applied every few weeks.

Carpenter ants do not eat wood but they do remove wood as they create galleries and tunnels for nesting. This is when they may do damage to buildings and may actually weaken a structure. Outdoors, carpenter ants feed on living and dead insects and honeydew. Indoors these ants feed on meats and pet food in addition to syrup, honey, sugar, jelly and other sweets. They will live in rotting wood but do little or no damage to live garden plants, as an example the carpenter ant present on a dead tree or perennial flower did not kill the tree or flower but are simply seeking sweet liquids in the dead plant.

The best method to control carpenter ants is to locate and destroy the nest, replace damaged or decayed wood and eliminate moisture problems that attract these ants. Bait insecticides do offer a means of control. However, complete control should be performed by an experienced pest management specialist.

The ants crawling in your house and tunneling under your patio and driveway are only doing their "ant thing". But their activity does become a nuisance like the quiet mice in the basement. Again, a good solution is the use of commercial insecticides in the form of baits, granules or sprays. Pouring hot water into the ant holes does not work and will just cause the ants to move their colony a short distance away. An organic means of control is to mix one cup of sugar and one cup of borax together then sprinkle the mixture around the ant hills. Borax is highly toxic to ants. Another solution is to sprinkle a couple packets of Equal or Nutra Sweet around the hill. Ants think this is sugar but it's really poisonous to ants. Makes you wonder what artificial sweeteners are doing to people.

"Ants have the most complicated social organization on earth next to humans." and, "Ants are the dominant insects of the world, and they've had a great impact on habitats almost all over the

land surface of the world for more than 50 million years.” E. O. Wilson, entomologist at Harvard and Duke Universities. Considered the world’s authority on ants.