



Managing Fire Ants in Urban Areas Requires Timing, Patience

ANTIXX[®] FIRE ANT BAIT

Aggressive fire ants cause expensive property damage to urban structures, electrical equipment and recreational areas. However, they can be managed with proper timing and products.

The red imported fire ant, or RIFA, has a painful sting for unsuspecting humans and animals. The ants also hurt city budgets—for example, when a traffic signal has to be repaired because fire ants built a nest inside and chewed up the wires¹. Fire ants are known to invade everything from schoolyards to golf courses and building walls to air conditioners². They even nest under cracked pavement, removing dirt underneath and causing structural damage².

The fire ant is a billion-dollar problem³.

After being accidentally imported to the U.S. in the 1950s from South America, the RIFA has spread throughout the southern tier of the United States. Fortunately, research shows there are a few successful control strategies to minimize their destructive presence, though total eradication is not feasible.

Timing is everything when it comes to managing fire ant populations. Janet Hurley is a Texas AgriLife Extension specialist whose expertise is in integrated pest management for schools. She says when treating fire ants, the key is to try and stay ahead of them with fire ant bait.



In Hawaii, a rainforest species called little fire ant nests on the ground, in leaf litter and on vegetation. After foraging on vegetation, they will fall to the ground—often on people and pets. An infested area will have millions of ants per acre, so staying on top of treatment is crucial.

“We typically recommend a spring and a fall broadcast treatment,” she explains. “But even if I was doing it in my flowerbed, I would want to do that after the soil temperature gets up to 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. They’ve got to be foraging for the bait to work. When it’s cool, you might see some fire ants come out, but they’re just trying to warm up. When the soil starts to warm up, they start foraging and they don’t stop until September or October, depending on where you are. If you’re in a warm area like the Texas Rio Grande Valley where it hardly ever gets cold, they don’t stop. Ever.”

In between the seasonal broadcast treatments, you can control recurring mounds with a fast-acting bait as needed. It’s called the “Two-Step Program⁴.”

“If you bait and you’re really good about it, generally you can keep ahead of them,” Hurley advises. “We recommend area-wide baiting. But you also have to understand it doesn’t happen overnight. It typically takes a few days for the product to work and take out the mound.”

As far as active ingredients go, Hurley says products containing spinosad are a good choice when quick control

is needed and exposure to chemicals is a concern, such as near a daycare or just personal preference. Spinosad is a naturally occurring metabolite of soil-dwelling bacteria.

“I like it because of how it’s manufactured,” she explains. “Rather than being synthetic or man-made, it’s processed in a way that mimics nature. Therefore, it’s not harmful to nature.”

Products like Antixx[®] Fire Ant Bait, which have spinosad as their active ingredient, are highly effective and kill the colony inside and out—including the queen. Dead ants appear within 24 to 36 hours and protection lasts up to two months.

The University of Florida Extension program has a great resource in “Managing Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas,” available at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/lh059>. Some tips include:

- If fire ants are entering a building to forage (a bigger problem during hot, dry summers and in floods), locate and treat mounds near the building. Remove any food items the ants could be feeding on. Vacuum indoor ant trails and dispose of the vacuum bag promptly—after using soapy water to kill the ants inside.
- Before treating any electrical equipment, turn off the power. Use an individual mound treatment to get rid of colonies around electrical and plumbing casing and housings. Treating a larger area around the electrical structure will prolong protection.
- Make sure your fire ant bait hasn’t gotten old or rancid. Fire

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ants will be repelled from stale bait. Maintain the freshness and attractiveness of the bait by keeping containers tightly sealed and use the product within the season of purchase. Apply baits when ground is dry and rain is not expected within 24 hours.

- Use a potato chip and a small amount of bait to determine a) if ants are actively foraging and b) your bait is still attractive. If the ants go after the chip but not your bait, then it’s not fresh. If they don’t go after either, they aren’t foraging so it’s not a good application time anyway. In addition to proper soil temperatures, avoid baiting during the hottest parts of the day when ants are less likely to forage.
- Effective control of fire ants will require repeated treatments, proper application and appropriate product selection.

An ongoing commitment to managing fire ant infestations is worth the time and effort, particularly in urban areas where liability could be an issue. It doesn’t take much for a previously controlled area to get out of hand—a queen only needs a half dozen workers to start a new colony and they can build new mounds almost overnight¹.

More information is available at www.neudorffpro.org/ant-baits.html.

1. *Managing Fire Ants in Urban Areas*, University of Florida-Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/LH/LH05900.pdf>
2. *Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA)*, Virginia Cooperative Extension, <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/444/444-284/444-284.html>
3. *Other Impacts of Fire Ants*, National Cooperative Extension, <https://ant-pests.extension.org/other-impacts-of-fire-ants/>
4. *Managing Fire Ants for Specific Sites*, Texas AgriLife Extension, <https://fireant.tamu.edu/manage/site/>