



URI COLLEGE OF THE
ENVIRONMENT AND LIFE
SCIENCES (CELS) OUTREACH
CENTER

3 East Alumni Avenue
Kingston, Rhode Island 02881

For more information:

Call:

In RI: URI MGA Hotline
1-800-448-1011
Mon.-Thurs. 9:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m.

In MA and CT: 401-874-2900

Outside New England please
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Websites:

URI Master Gardener Association
www.urimga.org

CELS Outreach Center
www.uri.edu/cels/ceo

CARPENTER ANTS

Carpenter ants are named for their habit of excavating, tunneling, and living in wood. Two kinds of carpenter ants are of concern: the red carpenter and the black carpenter ant. Their habits and sizes are similar, but the latter is by far the more common.

Carpenter ants are among the largest ants. Winged males are much smaller than winged queens, which measure 3/4 inch to the tips of their wings. Wingless queens measure 5/8 inch. They have constricted waists. Adults are usually black; some species have red, brown, or yellow on parts of the body and legs.

Outdoors, they are frequently seen running over plants and tree trunks or living in moist, partly rotten wood stumps. Buildings close to a forest with rotting logs and trees are likely candidates for carpenter ant infestations.

Indoors

Carpenter ants are a nuisance when found in the home. When 20 or more large winged and/or wingless ants are found indoors in the daytime near one location it is possible that the colony is well established in the home and the nest may have been extended into sound wood, sometimes causing structural damage. They do not eat wood, but often remove quantities of it to expand their nest size. However, if only one to two large wingless ants are erratically crawling, they may simply be foraging for food with the nest located outside.

The most important and often most difficult part of carpenter ant control is locating the nest. Control is very easy and simple once the nest location is found. Sometimes more than one colony is present in the structure or on its grounds, so a thorough inspection by a professional is very important.

The presence of large ants usually is the first sign of infestation. Coarse sawdust is a sure sign, but it is often difficult to find the nest. At night, turning on a light to observe ant activity around sugary bait that has been left out may reveal an "ant line" to and from the nest. Sometimes the insects' activity can be heard in walls. Tapping areas suspected of harboring nests with a hammer may produce a hollow sound, and some excited ants may appear.

Boric acid has proven to be an effective ant control. Make a solution by thoroughly dissolving 1 teaspoon of boric acid and 10 teaspoons of sugar in 2 cups of

PESTICIDES ARE POISONOUS!! Read and follow all safety precautions on labels. Handle carefully and store in original containers out of reach of children, pets, or livestock. Dispose of empty containers immediately, in a safe manner and place. Pesticides should never be stored with foods or in areas where people eat.

When trade names are used for identification, no product endorsement is implied, nor is discrimination intended against similar materials. Be sure that the pesticide that you wish to use is registered in the state of use.

The user of this information assumes all risk for personal injury or property damage.

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Note: The Hotline is open Monday—Thursday, 9:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m. from March 1 to November 1.

water. Soak cotton balls in this solution and place them in a small dish. Keep the cotton from drying out for continued effectiveness by covering the container and replenishing with the boric acid solution when needed.

There is usually no need to tear walls open to eliminate a colony. Drilling a small hole (1/4 to 1/8 inch) into suspect areas such as walls, sills, joists, underneath sinks, behind appliances, or below outside siding can aid in the application of insecticide to the nest if the boric acid solution is not effective. The most effective control is achieved when an insecticide such as an ant and roach killer is placed in the ants' nest. If you cannot locate the nest but manage to leave insecticide nearby workers may carry the poison into the nest on their feet.

In Trees

The forest is the carpenter ant's natural habitat. Carpenter ants in trees are not directly harmful to the tree. Carpenter ants infest live, dead, or fallen trees wherever there is some rot and moisture. They play an important role in recycling wood in the forest. Carpenter ant nests are very common inside trees, especially older trees that are hollow or have a significant amount of dead limbs and branches.

Control is not essential for the tree's health, as the ants are only taking advantage of an existing situation of soft, weak wood in which to establish their colony. Stress, mechanical injury, environmental conditions, disease, or other insects are responsible for killing limbs or sections of the trees in which the ants are able to nest. Once injury has occurred wood decay can set in if moisture is present; it is the wood decay that gives the carpenter ants the opportunity to colonize the tree. Carpenter ants use knots, cracks, holes, and old insect tunnels to gain access to these areas.

Control of carpenter ants inside trees is difficult but can be done as a way to reduce ant invasion into adjacent structures. It is also possible for ant colonies located inside trees to form satellite colonies inside a nearby home wall. Available controls are not likely to permanently rid a tree of carpenter ants so retreatment every year or so may be necessary. Dust insecticides (such as Sevin or rotenone) labeled for use on trees in the landscape are suggested for control. Apply the dust directly into the nest cavity. Plugging or sealing tree cavities or treating tree wounds with wound dressings is not advised. Also, cutting down otherwise viable trees that happen to be infested with carpenter ants is generally not necessary.

Adapted from: University of Maine Cooperative Extension and the Cornell Cooperative Extension, 1999; Ohio State University Extension; Iowa Insect Notes, 2001