



Information

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Argentine Ants

Ants are social insects that belong to the same order as wasps and bees (Order Hymenoptera). They generally build large colonies with distinct caste systems. The queen is inseminated by a male, and the male dies soon after. All of the workers in the nest are non-reproductive females, who collect food and care for the developing offspring. The role of the queen is to lay more eggs and to ultimately produce the next generation of reproductives. Colonies can have thousands of individuals, most of them workers. Most ant species in California nest in the ground and are scavengers, feeding on living or dead insects, nectar, honeydew, or food available in human kitchens.

Most of the pest ant species in California are introduced from elsewhere, and the Argentine ant, *Linepithema humile*, is no exception. The Argentine ant was first noticed in North America in 1890, and most likely stowed-away in cases of coffee or sugar from Argentina. This aggressive ant species is now found in the vicinity of human habitations throughout the state.

Adult Argentine Ants are small, less than 1/10 inch long, relatively soft-bodied and are dark brown to black in color. They emit a musty odor when crushed. The Argentine ant is different from most other ants because new queens do not leave the nest to mate and begin a new colony. They instead mate with males within the nest and remain in the existing colony to produce more offspring. Thus multiple queens exist in a single nest of Argentine Ants, and the boundary between colonies is vague. As a result, Argentine Ant colonies can get quite large.

Argentine ants are attracted to sugar and tend other insects, such as aphids, mealy bugs, whiteflies and scale insects, that produce a sticky, sweet substance called honeydew. The ants can become serious garden and agricultural pests because they will carry honeydew producing pest insects to new host plants. In doing so they protect these injurious insects from parasites and predators, and will transport them to new plants much like shepherds tending flocks of sheep.

Colonies of Argentine ants have very specific moisture requirements. Although these ants seem to be found everywhere, the nests are always built in soil with a specific moisture content. They will not make nests in dry soils or those that are too wet. Potted plants are favorite sites and this is one of the ways that these ants



have been transported to new habitats. During the winter, Argentine ants will enter homes because their nest site has become too wet or flooded by rain. Additionally, these are subtropical ants and cannot tolerate hard freezing winters. Colonies decline in cold weather.

Argentine ants are highly successful in California because

- Unlike most ants, Argentine ant colonies do not fight with one another. All colonies are so genetically similar that they do not see each other as foreign.
- Multiple queens are found in each colony allowing colonies to become large and stable; the death of one queen has little effect on the rest of the colony.
- These ants are highly adaptable and can nest in a variety of habitats and substrates.
- Argentine ants have an omnivorous diet.
- There are no natural enemies of Argentine ants in North America.
- Argentine ants are easily transported in shipping and packing material.

Argentine Ants are major household pests and will enter homes and other buildings in enormous numbers searching for food, shelter from weather, or moisture. These ants are particularly fond of sweets and protein and will invade kitchens and garbage cans. During the dry summer months they will also enter homes searching for water, invading both kitchens and bathrooms.

Controlling Argentine Ant populations in and around the home is no easy task. It is important to determine where ants are entering the home and close those points of entry. Keep food and trash containers sealed and clean, and wipe up spills immediately.