

Argentine Ants



Ants are social insects in same order as wasps and bees (Hymenoptera). They generally build large colonies with distinct castes, queens, workers and males. 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 eggs and to produce the next generation of workers and reproductives. Colonies can have thousands of individuals, most of them workers. Most ant species in California are scavengers, feeding on 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 ant is now found in the vicinity of human habitations where there is irrigation or potted plants throughout the state.

Argentine ants differ are small, less than 1/10 in. long, relatively soft-bodied and are dark brown to black in color. They emit a musty odor when crushed. Unlike other ants new Argentine 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 can exist in a single nest of and the boundary between colonies is vague. As a result, Argentine ant colonies can get really large.

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

Colonies of Argentine ants have very specific moisture needs. Although they seem to be found everywhere, the nests are never made in dry soils or those that are too wet.

Potted plants are favorite sites and this is one of the ways that the ants are transported to new habitats. During the winter, Argentine ants will enter homes because their nest site has become too wet or flooded by rain. These are subtropical ants and cannot tolerate hard freezing winters. Colonies decline in cold weather.

Argentine ants are major pests in California because unlike most ants, Argentine ant colonies do not fight with one another, the colonies are so closely related 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. They have no natural enemies in North America. Finally, they are easily transported in shipping materials.

Argentine ants are major household pests and will enter homes and other buildings in large 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.



Argentine ants. Photo courtesy of Alexander Wild, www.alexanderwild.com.