

How do you spell nuisance?

A N T S

For many of us ants are a pain, especially carpenter ants! Those large --usually black-- ants that come into our homes looking for sweet and fatty foods. Ants know what tastes good. If only that fat would give them little ant coronaries. Since it doesn't work that way, how do you banish them?

The first step is critter identification. There are many species of ants in Maine and each has its own habits. Generally carpenter ants are 1/4 - 3/4 inch long and may be black or red. Your local Extension office or the University Pest Management Office (1-800-287-0279) can confirm the diagnosis. Once you know the enemy, you can plot their eviction.

Most carpenter ant infestations involve a few scouts who are looking for good grub or a little oasis to quench their thirst. These scouts are sent out by their queen --usually under the cover of darkness-- from a nest in rotted wood. They follow driveway edges or tree branches and enter through foundation cracks or roof vents. If they find food or water, they recruit others to go back for the spoils. A flashlight will reveal a whole caravan of workers marching between the house and nest. Eventually the colony may outgrow its quarters and establish a satellite community. If the oasis is inside a house, the new nesting site may be indoors.

Carpenter ants are not like termites. They don't eat wood. They chew wood damaged by rots or foam insulation commonly used under vinyl siding or around foundations. Coarse sawdust mixed with small black pellets (ant poop) or the most frightening version of the species, flying ants may indicate an indoor nest.

Whether you find the casual marauder or a group of squatters, there is no need to panic. They won't eat your whole house and their damage occurs at a slow pace only revealing structural damage that existed before their arrival.

To find their lair, put out a bait of jam and cat food and set your alarm for midnight. The caravan will bring you to the nest(s). Clean up food sources and put staples inside containers. Fix leaky pipes or roofs. Just this may send them away. Remove access points. Keep shrubs and trees six feet away from the house. Eliminate rotten stumps within 50 feet. Replace damaged or rotted wood. Seal cracks along foundations and around windows, doors or vents.

Finally, if the little buggers keep coming or if there is a nest inside the home, explore control options. The Board of Pesticides Control (BPC) (207-287-2731) can help you shop for a licensed pest management professional or provide a list of carpenter ant control products. Read and follow all pesticide label directions carefully. Direct controls into the nest(s). Foundation sprays are not very effective and pose a greater potential for human or animal exposure. In the spring, baits can also be effective when placed along ant runways.

The BPC motto is --Think First...Spray Last. When you must spray, reduce the risk. Use the least toxic material in as small an area as possible where nothing other than the ants will contact it. Better yet, learn to live with them since they really are *just* a nuisance. On the web at <http://www.thinkfirstspraylast.org> .

Gary Fish, Environmental Specialist, for the Board of Pesticides Control, submitted this column. In Our Backyard is a weekly column of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. E-mail your environmental questions to infodep@state.me.us or send them to In Our Backyard, Maine DEP, 17 State House Station, Augusta, ME.