

# FastFacts

## About Carpenter Ants

by Mariangela Pfister

**No matter what time of the year it is, it is always a good idea to plan for the beginning of the home maintenance season. Spring brings with it flowers, warm temperatures and, unfortunately, it can also bring bugs—carpenter ants to be precise. Carpenter ants are LARGE blackish-colored ants. In a well-established colony, some of the ants will have wings.**

How can you tell if you have an ant problem? If you see a few wingless ants here and there, you are likely seeing scouts that are out searching for food. Carpenter ants like both sweet and greasy foods. However, if you see many large black ants, and/or ants with wings, it is possible that you have a more well-established colony or nest of ants that at least warrants further observation. If you see a large number of swarming ants in or close to your home in the spring, you may in fact have a carpenter ant problem. Also, you may have a nest in your home if you see the large ants year 'round. They will come out often to forage for food. If you don't see the ants year 'round, it may be that the ants have their nest in a tree or another building or some other remote location and are just coming into your house in search of food during the spring and summer months.

The dangers of carpenter ants are often overlooked. Termites are often the greater worry for many people. Though carpenter ants don't eat wood as termites do, they do burrow through it, and have the potential to cause damage to wood. Therefore, it's very important to take care of a carpenter ant infestation as soon as possible.

What do you do once you've established that you have a carpenter ant problem? The best first step is to do some investigation. Look for the ants. Watch their movements. Follow their trail. Listen for them in voids. They make a distinctive clicking sound. Look for their frass (powdery sawdust-like matter they leave behind

as they burrow). Ants can follow a distinctive trail and often forage for food at night. So, take out your flashlight and search in and around your home. Try to find the location where the ants are entering and leaving. This could very well be the location of the nest. If you have in fact found the nest, you are close to winning the battle. The queen ant remains in the nest. If you destroy the nest, thus killing the queen, the colony is also destroyed. The ultimate goal is always to find and destroy the nest.

For many people however, the nest is elusive. The nest could be in another building or in a tree. The ants can find their way into your home via low-hanging branches or power/utility lines or via cracks or gaps. If you can't find the nest, or are unsure if you've found it, it's still a good idea to investigate and see if you can at least find the trail. This information will greatly aid a professional exterminator. I don't recommend treating the carpenter ant infestation yourself. A professional, licensed exterminator is the person best equipped to handle your ant problem. Contact your local extension agency or Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office for the list of chemicals most commonly used in carpenter ant extermination. This information will assist you in your hiring of an exterminator. Ask the exterminator for a list of chemicals he/she plans to use to see if it matches up with the other information you've received. Always get a written estimate (these should be free) detailing the work to be done and chemicals to be used. The best exterminator will warranty their work for a certain period of time at no extra cost. This means that if after treatment you still see ants, the company will return and retreat at no cost. Also, contact your local Better Business Bureau for information on the exterminator you have chosen. Ask for references. A reputable professional in any field will be willing to give references. Exterminators often

use wettable powders, sprays, granular insecticides and/or baits. In any system, the key is to get at the nest directly or for the ants to take the poison back to the nest to kill the queen. Be certain to ask your exterminator how long children and pets should remain away from the treated areas.

Finally, make your home unappealing to carpenter ants. These ants love moist wood. Make certain your drainage systems are working properly; your roof does not leak; your plumbing does not leak; your flashing and caulk joints are sound; dirt around your house doesn't touch any wood directly and is graded in a way to direct water away from you house; and all wood surfaces are sound and well painted. Replace wood elements that are rotted with new wood pieces that match the old. Keep firewood well away from your home and don't use wood mulch around the base of your house. Wood mulches are designed to stay moist and so are very appealing to carpenter ants. Trim bushes away from your house and trim low-hanging branches away from your roof. Ants like to drop onto your roof from these branches. Don't give them that easy bridge. Finally, make sure your house is well ventilated. This will help keep things dry.

By keeping the wood of your home dry and well maintained, you're making it more difficult for carpenter ants to invade it initially or after treatment. However, if you do have an infestation, do some investigating in an attempt to find the source of moist wood as well as the nest or trail. Then call a professional exterminator. Treat the problem quickly and then keep your home's wood dry and well maintained to keep new carpenter ants away.

**For more information about carpenter ants, contact the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office.**

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