

Manage Fire Ants Now

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Winter is fast approaching, but we can all remember our painful experiences dealing with fire ants this past year. Fortunately, right now is a great time to be proactive in taking care of any fire ant problems you might have. According to Dr. Dan Suiter, a UGA Cooperative Extension entomologist with the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, attacking fire ant colonies now will help next spring when they start to swarm again. Dr. Suiter says fire ants are easier to kill now for four main reasons.

First, they're more active. That makes it easier to treat them with fire ant baits. "You can use fire ant baits any time of the year," Suiter said. "But they're most effective when the ants are actively foraging for food." Fire ants are most active in spring and fall, when daytime temperatures are between 70 and 85 degrees, he said. Actively foraging ants will pick up bait and carry it into the nest within the first hour or two. If the ants are inactive, the bait may not appeal to the ants by the time they find it.

Second, in the cooler weather of fall, fire ants aren't too deep in the ground. That makes them easier to kill with a mound-drench, granular, dust or aerosol contact insecticide. When you use those products, it's critical to treat when the queen and brood are close to the surface.

Third, in the fall, you're treating when many fire ant colonies are very young. Fire ants mate all year long, but they're most actively mating in the spring. Mated queens fly away and establish new colonies. By fall, these colonies are well-established but still fairly small. "Quite often, you don't even know they're there," he said. "But if you don't treat them, they'll become the big mounds you see next year."

Fourth, and the one thing that makes fall the single best time to treat fire ants, Suiter said, is that it's followed by winter. Extreme cold is tough on fire ants. This makes baits even more effective in the fall. Baits also take a long time to work. They weaken colonies and make them less able to respond to the challenges of winter weather. Young colonies are especially vulnerable because they don't have many workers. So they can't respond very quickly to the need to escape freezing temperatures.

So how do you treat for fire ants if you don't know where they are? Broadcasting fire ant bait is the first step in the process. Use fresh bait and apply it using the label directions. Never apply bait using a spreader that's been used to spread fertilizer. Fertilizer can contaminate the smell of the bait. Use only a new spreader, dedicated only to the use of spreading fire ant bait.

Treat individual problem mounds with an approved contact product. Be sure to follow directions carefully. Misuse of pesticides, like fire ant control products, is a violation of federal law. Lots of misuse comes from homeowners who think that what they put out isn't strong enough to kill the ants. But

many of the chemicals are pretty much the same as professional chemicals. Proper use is important since misuse of insecticides has resulted in some active ingredients, like bifenthrin, showing up at unacceptable levels in lakes and streams.

Fire ants are a pain, but now is a good time to make sure they're not as much of a pain next year. For more information on this and many other topics, you can contact the Madison County Cooperative Extension office at 706-795-2281 or visit our website at <http://www.caes.uga.edu/extension/madison>.