

Controlling Fire Ants

Before moving to Thomasville, I worked a short time with a pest control service north of Atlanta. Ants are a nuisance there as they are here. I was employed as a sales representative but sometimes helped as a service technician finishing service tickets at the end of each month.

On one particular day, I was scheduled a few fire ant services. The technician manager was looking over my tickets to make sure I had what I needed. He called me from the cooperate office in Nashville, TN and said, "Andrew, I want to let another technician complete these ant services for you. I do not want to risk you getting stung by ants and having anaphylactic shock – in case you have never been stung." I laughed and replied, "Oh Mr. Jack, you do not have to worry. Where I am from in South Georgia, fire ant mounds are three times the size of cow pies. My friends and I used to stomp the mounds then quickly stick our hands in to see who could leave their hand in the mound the longest."

There was a long pause on the phone and no response to my comment. Jack Reed may have had a quick feeling of "hirer's" remorse about his most recent hire. To him, I was either brave or half crazy. But either way, he knew I wasn't scared.

Fire ants are most active in warm weather and the season in South Georgia can last 10 or 11 months. Controlling ant colonies before they produce a mound is important. However, UGA Entomologist, Dr. Will Hudson, says that once a treatment program is in effect, timing is not all that important:

"April and September are good times to apply baits, once at the start of the season and toward the end to help control before they come back in the spring."

Do I use baits or sprays?

Generally, if the area is one acre or less, do not use baits. Ant re-infestation is more likely from colonies outside of the yard when baits are used.

One important thing to remember is the difference between 'no mounds' and 'no ants.' "There is a difference between eliminating ants and controlling them," he said. "Baits do not eliminate ants because there is no residual control. A new colony can still come in and be unaffected by the bait laid down prior to their arrival."

To eliminate mounds completely, Hudson says apply baits every six months. "There will be invasions in the meantime, and you will still have fire ants, just not enough to create a new mound."

Hudson recommends treating lawns smaller than an acre with a registered insecticide in a liquid solution. This should rid the lawn of fire ants for one to three months. You can also use a granular product.

According to Dr. Hudson, the least effective treatment option for most people is individual mound treatments. Treating mounds in general is going to be an exercise of frustration, and killing an entire colony by treating just the mound is a challenge, he said.

Minimal impact

Baits are considered to have minimal environmental effects for those who chose not to use chemicals. Ants get to the bait quickly, leaving little time for anything else to contact it.

Nonchemical options include using steam or boiling water. "We recommend using boiling water to treat a mound near an area such as a well where you do not want any chemicals," Hudson said. It is effective, but it is not always easy to boil water next to a mound. You risk inflicting serious burn when carrying boiling water, so extreme caution should be used when treating with this method.

It is important to maintain realistic expectations with ant control. Dr. Hudson says, "If you are treating mounds, you need to be prepared. You are going to chase the mounds around the yard."

I certainly do not recommend inspecting fire ant mounds the way I did as a kid. My method should be called the "live and learn method." I learned how not to control fire ants with my arms down in a bucket of ice cold water for 30 minutes thereafter.

Information from this article was taken from "Now Is a Good Time to Control Fire Ants!" by Sarah Lewis of the UGA College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. For additional questions, contact the Thomas County Extension office at 225-4130.