

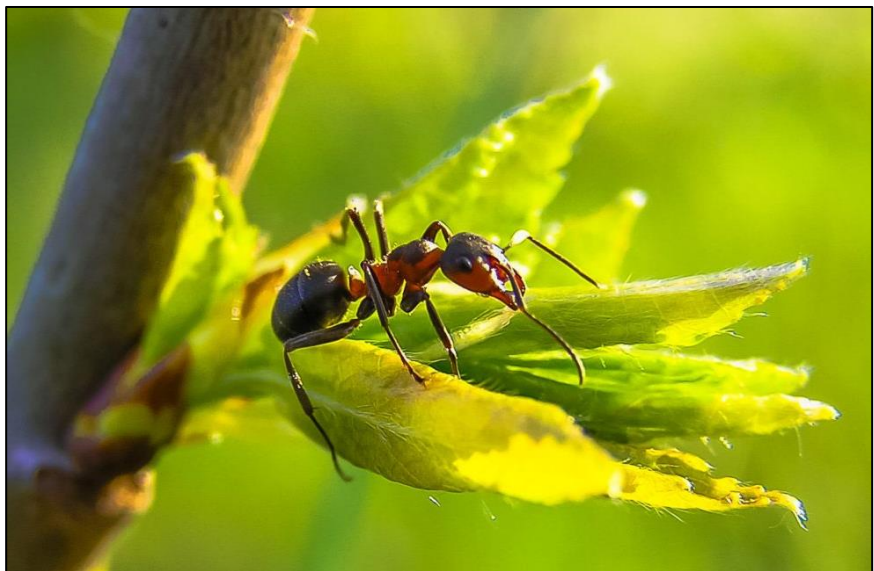
Year Round Gardening

Ants in the Garden

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Earlier this year I noticed some unsightly mounds in my pink chintz thyme groundcover. They were swarming with ants, yuck. I don't ordinarily make a lot of effort to suppress ants, but I didn't want my perennial garden to be littered with ant hills. I was determined to rid that part of my landscape of these pesky mound builders.

Colorado is home to at least seven kinds of ants. They include field ants, cornfield ants, carpenter ants and pharaoh ants. They are all social insects with underground nests and either one or several queens. Most ants are female, wingless workers. Occasionally you may see winged ants, these are mating ants, the males die soon after they mate and a newly fertilized queen will shed her wings once she is impregnated.



Ants are ubiquitous and far more beneficial to our gardens than damaging. Ants feed on other insects including pests, tunneling helps aerate the soil and recycles organic matter. A campaign to rid your garden entirely of ants is not just pointless, it is a bad idea. However, spot treatment to preserve the appearance of your garden may be required. While I am generally not a fan of killing beneficial insects, there is little danger spot treatment by the home gardener will really make a dent in the local ant population.

There are several non-pesticide approaches; problem is most will not work. Ant nests can be located several feet underground. Boiling water poured on a nest will probably not be hot enough to do any damage to the nest by the time it penetrates. Corn meal making ants explode is another garden myth. You cannot drown ants as they can live submerged for several days.

Spray-on pesticides kill only the ants they touch. The best approach to eliminate a colony is probably toxic bait. You must get the ants to carry a toxin into the nest where it will be ingested by all ants including the queen(s). That means a slow acting toxin mixed with something the ants will find appetizing. Boric acid (Borax) is a common bait toxin. Mixed with jelly, honey or peanut butter, and set out next to tunnel entrances can effectively wipe out a colony. This is not an instant fix, it may take several bait traps and a couple of weeks to finish the colony off. Traps can be purchased or you can make homemade traps. Do not sprinkle borax directly on soil it can deter plant growth. Keep pets and children away from the bait.

When you accidentally step on an ant colony, and your shoes are covered with creepy critters remember they do more good than harm. Only go after these fascinating creatures when it is absolutely necessary. To learn more about ants in the garden and in the home read CSU Fact sheet Ants in the Home – 5.518 located at <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/insects/ants-in-the-home-5-518/>.

When you have questions, CSU Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions at ask.extension.org or visit the office at 17 N. Spruce Street. Help Desk hours are Monday to Thursday from 9 am – 12 pm, phone 520-7684 or email CSUmq2@elpasoco.com. For upcoming events visit <http://elpaso.extension.colostate.edu/>