

Carpenter Ants A Nuisance But Not Much Of A Threat

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.)—As the weather warms, homeowners may panic if they notice large black ants—most likely carpenter ants—in and around their house, fearing that the home's structural timbers are at risk to the pests. But even if you have a carpenter ant infestation, you probably have little to worry about, says a Penn State expert.

"Although often blamed for causing damage to wood, carpenter ants usually are little more than a nuisance," says Steven Jacobs, senior extension associate in entomology in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Carpenter ants are somewhat lazy," Jacobs explains. "They usually attack wood that's already rotted. If they run into a sound, dry piece of wood, they generally won't go much farther. But they have been known to cause extensive damage to soft materials, such as insulation board."

Carpenter ant workers are wingless, dark brown to black in color and 1/4 to 1/2 inch long. The winged reproductives resemble the workers but are up to 3/4 inch

long. The ants' bodies are constricted between the thorax and the abdomen.

Because carpenter ants are social insects that live in colonies and excavate wood, they often are mistaken for termites. However, termite workers are creamy white and live hidden from view. Winged termite reproductives may resemble carpenter ants, but termite bodies are not constricted between the thorax and abdomen. Also, termites' antennae are straight with bead-like segments, whereas carpenter ant antennae are elbowed.

In nature, carpenter ants aid in the decomposition of dead, decaying trees by excavating rotted wood for nesting sites. They eat dead insects and other small invertebrates as well as honeydew secreted by aphids and scale insects.

When foraging for food, carpenter ants may find their way inside your house. There, they will feed on meats and foods containing sugar and fat. In some cases, these foraging workers may establish a satellite colony in the house, congregating in existing voids, such as

hollow doors or the space between studs in walls.

"In homes, the ants typically do not excavate wood for nests," says Jacobs. "They may tunnel through sound structural timbers, but this has little effect on the timber's structural integrity."

Jacobs says to get rid of the ants, the parent and satellite nests must be found and eliminated:

- Use a flashlight to look for foraging workers at night. "Check basement, attic, garage and building exterior from May through July between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.," says Jacobs. "It may be possible to find where they're entering the house or follow them back to their parent colony, which often is located in a tree, log or waste wood within 100 yards of the house. If numerous winged reproductive ants are found at windows, they probably came from an indoor nest."

- Check areas where the wood may be wet or damp because of poor ventilation, a leaking roof, defective flashing, overflowing or leaking gutters and downspouts, condensation from water

Penn State Pointers ▶ Carpenter Ants or Termites? Nuisance or Threat?

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These signs determine if the insect infesting your wood is a carpenter ant or a termite:

Carpenter ants' antennae are "elbowed" Termites are straight and segmented

Carpenter ants are constricted between the thorax and abdomen

Unlike termites, carpenter ants don't feed on wood, but they often nest in deteriorating wood.

To reduce ant problems:

- Replace water-damaged or decaying wood
- Seal openings and cracks in buildings and foundations
- Keep all firewood or waste wood at least 100 feet from buildings
- If needed, apply sprays once a month around the exteriors of foundations (from April through Sept.)

Carpenter ants are dark brown or black in color

Additional graphics and information available on the Internet at aginfo.psu.edu/psp

pipes, or leaking bathtubs, showers and appliances. "Look for piles of coarse, stringy wood particles, dead insect parts and other debris sifting from cracks in the siding, behind moldings, in the basement and attic and under porches," Jacobs says. "Because carpenter ants don't feed on wood, excavated particles are dumped outside the nest. Satellite colonies within homes sometimes can be located by listening for rustling sounds in walls and ceilings using a stethoscope or inverted water glass."

- Remove stumps, logs and waste wood within 100 yards of the building. Do not allow vegetation, especially evergreen shrubs and trees, to be in contact with the house.

- Store firewood away from the house, bringing it into the house only when needed.

- Keep wooden parts of the house dry by making needed repairs to roofs, flashing, gutters and downspouts. Replace any water-damaged, decaying wood. "Carpenter ants usually won't

infest wood that is sound and has a moisture content of less than 15 percent," Jacobs explains.

- Seal holes through which pipes and wires enter the house.

- Spraying insecticide along baseboards and around doors and windows may stop ants from foraging in those areas temporarily. But because the nests often are in walls, it won't eliminate the problem. "Commercial baits aren't very effective for carpenter ants," Jacobs says. "Your best bet is to spray around the exterior of the foundation, which provides a barrier to ant movement. Sprays should be applied at least once a month from April through September for most areas of Pennsylvania."

"Use only products manufactured and approved for this purpose and carefully follow the instructions and precautions on the label," Jacobs warns.

Jacobs says if you prefer to hire professional help to get rid of carpenter ants, first get estimates from at least three reputable pest control companies.

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4-H HAPPENINGS

Cumberland Co. Horse Club
 The Cumberland County Light Horse and Pony Club held their monthly meeting on February 23. The meeting was held at Green Ridge Village, Newville, at 7 p.m. Nikki McCaffrey called the meeting to order.

The meeting's program was horse health care and worming. Janet Holsten, senior horsemanship leader, had arranged for a guest speaker from Pfizer Fantasia Animal Health. The speaker, Mr. Shaverlson, spoke about the effects of worming and an everyday wormer.

After the program, the treasurer's and secretary's reports were read. Carrie McLaughlin and Michelle Thomas led the club in the 4-H pledge and a song. Following book group meetings and refreshments, the next meeting was announced for March 22 at 7 p.m. at Green Ridge Village.

Lebanon Co. Horse Club
 The Latigo 4-H Horse Club discussed upcoming fundraisers at its February 11 meeting at Hideaway Hills. The club plans to sell pretzels and baked goods at a horse auction in April. Members are also encouraged to sell 4-H cookies to help out the club and county programs.

During the meeting, the club also announced that each member will be doing a presentation on a horse-related topic at one of this year's meetings. Members practiced communications skills by working on an activity called "Talking Horse." The club also announced that all county horse club members are invited to attend the horse social on Friday, March 24.



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