Fire Your Ants

They are smaller than a pencil eraser, invade yards in the millions, cause one of the nastiest bites, and in numbers can kill a newborn calf. Red Imported Fire Ants, or RIFA, are one of the most aggressive ants known to man. They are also one of the most invasive pests that we, living in the south, have to deal with.

Before trying to eliminate the pesky creatures from your yard, it is a good idea to know a little bit about the insect you are dealing with. Red Imported Fire Ants were introduced from South America into the United States at a port in Mobile, Alabama on a ship where soil was used as ballast. Since that time, the ants have made their way into eleven of the southern states, parts of California, and New Mexico. The United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service actually has a quarantine on RIFA. Information about the quarantine can be found here, http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/plant_pest_info/fireants/index.shtml. RIFA are usually a reddish brown color and can vary in size from 1/8 of an inch to 1/3 of an inch. They are easily identified by their aggressive nature and their irregular mound shape. They usually habituate bright sunny areas and like to form their colonies near flagpoles, fence posts, and cement areas.

Once you have correctly identified your fire ant friends, it is then time to try to limit their numbers. A mound that is approximately 2 feet in diameter and 18 inches high will contain about 100,000 fire ants. Now that is a lot of ants! According to North Carolina State University, the best way to keep your landscape free of RIFA is to do the “Two Step.” No, not the dance… the bait and shoot method.

Because fire ants are constantly foraging for food, the best way to start to limit their population is to use a bait. Baits are food laced with a chemical that inhibits the colony in some way. The foragers collect the bait then return to the mound and feed it to the queen. This first step eliminates the rapid reproduction within the mound. Before broadcasting a bait throughout your entire yard, there are a couple things to do. First, read the label on the bait. The label is the law. Second, ensure that the foragers are actually feeding. Use a greasy potato chip. Set the chip on the ground adjacent to a known mound, and wait. If the ants are busy foraging, within 30 minutes the chip should be covered. If the chip is not covered with RIFA, then you should wait for another time to broadcast the bait.
The second step is to use an insecticidal drench that is poured directly on the mound. An insecticidal drench will kill any ant that it comes in contact with. This kills the worker ants that are left within the mound after the queen has been disabled by the bait. Once this “Two Step” is complete, the mound will usually die and not reform a new colony.

Many people tend to use one method, a bait or drench, without the other. The problem with this is that you only make the colony mad and it will move about two feet and form anew. If you use a bait without a drench, you eliminate the queen, but you leave thousands of workers who will then select a new queen. If you use a drench without the bait, the workers will carry the queen deeper into the mound to safety away from the insecticide where she will then lay eggs and rebuild the mound.

Red Imported Fire Ants are a constant struggle in southern lawns. In the eight years that I have been in the south, I have heard all sorts of homegrown ways to kill RIFA. From hot water to grits, I have tried them all and can tell you from firsthand experience and from Extension research, that while they may kill some ants, they usually have no effect on the overall health of the mound. Lastly, I know it is irresistible, but kicking the mounds, while providing temporary satisfaction, will only aggravate the ants and sometimes cause satellite mounds to form. So next time you see the telltale mound form in your yard, just remember the “Two-Step.”

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