

Fire Ants

Fire ants, sometimes referred to as simply red ants, are stinging ants with over 280 species worldwide. They have several common names including Ginger Ants and Tropical Fire Ants (English), aka-kami-ari (Japanese), and Feuerameise (German).

Appearance

The bodies of fire ants, like all insects' bodies, are broken up into three sections: the head, the thorax, and the abdomen, with three pairs of legs and a pair of antennae. Fire ants can be distinguished from other ants by their copper brown head and body with a darker abdomen. The worker ants are blackish to reddish, and their size varies from 2mm to 6 mm (0.12 in to 0.24 in). These different sizes of the ants can all exist in the same nest.

Behavior

A typical fire ant colony produces large mounds in open areas, and feeds mostly on young plants, seeds, and sometimes crickets. Fire ants often attack small animals and can kill them. Unlike many other ants, which bite and then spray acid on the wound, fire ants only bite to get a grip and then sting (from the abdomen) and inject a toxic alkaloid venom called Solenopsin, a compound from the class of piperidines. For humans, this is a painful sting, a sensation similar to what one feels when burned by fire — hence the name fire ant — and the aftereffects of the sting can be deadly to sensitive individuals. Although fire ants do not typically seek out and attack the face, they are as likely to attack an exposed and vulnerable face as any other body part. The venom is both insecticidal and antibiotic. Researchers have proposed that nurse workers will spray their brood to protect them from microorganisms.

Fire ants nest in the soil, often near moist areas, such as river banks, pond edges, watered lawns and highway edges. Usually the nest will not be visible as it will be built under objects such as timber, logs, rocks, pavers, bricks, etc. If there is no cover for nesting, dome-shaped mounds will be constructed, but this is usually only found in open spaces such as fields, parks and lawns. These mounds can reach heights of 40 cm (15.7 in).

Colonies

are founded by small groups of queens or single queens. Even if only one queen survives, within a month or so the colony can expand to thousands of individuals. Some colonies may be polygynous (having multiple queens per nest).

In the Klang Valley of

Malaysia, fire ants build nests in leaves by folding the leaf sideways and downwards over itself, with the queen inside, and then excreting a sticky white substance with which they bond and seal the fold. The excretion is also used inside the folded leaf to cover the queen and the eggs, like a kind of translucent duvet. It should also be noted that fire ants commonly construct their nests out of dug-out mounds and complex tunnel systems.

The ants guard the nest and fiercely attack intruders. Even the lightest touch brings them out in a fury.