In the Bay Area, the ants most frequently found invading homes are called Argentine ants. Although they can be pests, ants provide an ecological cleansing and fertilization service of considerable importance. For example, they kill and eat many pest insects, aerate the soil, and recycle dead animal and vegetable material. Because of these beneficial aspects, it is undesirable (and probably downright impossible) to eliminate ants from their outside habitat. The best approach to ant management is to try to keep them outdoors.

**DETECTION**
Look for individual “scouts” or long lines of ants in or around the house near food or water. Distinguish Argentine ants from Carpenter ants by size. Argentine ants are small (1/8”), and their queens are slightly larger. Carpenter ants are 1/4” or larger and require different management techniques from those listed below for Argentine ants.

**LESS-TOXIC CONTROLS**

**INSIDE YOUR HOME**
- **Kill the scouts** so they can’t call in the hordes when they find a tasty tidbit.
- **Use ant baits** because they use a minimum of insecticide and confine it to a very small area (see “Tips for Using Ant Baits” on back).
- **Use insecticidal dusts** such as diatomaceous earth (DE) in wall voids and cracks before they are sealed. Use a hand duster to apply DE and wear a dust mask and goggles. DE has little toxicity to humans or pets, but kills insects by absorbing their outer waxy coating, causing dehydration and death.

**OUTSIDE YOUR HOME**
- **Use sticky barriers** around the trunk of a tree or bush to prevent ants from protecting aphids and other “honeydew”-producing insects. Prune any branches that touch walls, fences or the ground so ants cannot find alternate routes into the plant.
- **Ant Baits.** If you can find the spot outside where ants are entering the building (this is often difficult to do), place bait stations there; otherwise use baits only inside. Outside, rain and sprinklers can wash baits away, and you may end up attracting ants to your house.

**PREVENTION**
- **Store food in containers that seal tightly** or in the refrigerator when you notice ant activity.
- **Keep things clean and dry** and fix leaking faucets and pipes (ants need food and water).
- **Caulk cracks** where ants are entering the house. Weather-strip doors and windows.
- **Put pet dishes in a soapy moat.** Partially fill a wide, shallow container with soapy water and place pet dishes in the water.

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Choose less toxic products for your home and garden. Look for this symbol before you buy.
TIPS FOR USING ANT BAITS

Ant baits contain a pesticide mixed with an attractive food substance. Ants take small quantities of bait back to their nest to share with their nest mates. In this way the entire nest can sometimes be eliminated.

- Use baits with boric acid, hydramethylnon, fipronil, or arsenic as an active ingredient.
- Keep several different baits on hand because Argentine ants change their food preferences frequently. If one bait is not working, try another. Wait at least a day to see if they take the bait.

- Use baits inside (outside you may attract more ants to the house and rain and sprinklers will wash away bait).
- Do not spray insecticide around the bait; it will repel the ants.
- When ants are gone, remove the bait so you don’t attract more ants. If the bait you are using comes enclosed in a bait station, return it to its original box to save and use again. Put the box inside a plastic bag and seal it with a twist-tie.
- Baits may take several weeks to kill the ants. At first you may see more ants coming to the bait, but after a few days to a week you should see a significant reduction.

PRODUCTS

Examples of trade names of products listed in this fact sheet

Desiccating Dust: Concern® Diatomaceous Earth Crawling Insect Killer
Hand-Duster: Pest Pistol®
Sticky Barrier: Tanglefoot® and Stickem® Tree Pest Barrier
Baits containing Boric acid: Terro® Ant Killer II, Drax Ant Kil Gel®, Drax Ant Kil pf
Baits containing Hydramethylnon: Combat® Ant Control System
Baits containing Arsenic: Grants® Kills Ants
Baits containing Fipronil: Combat® Quick Kill Ant Bait

PESTICIDES AND WATER POLLUTION

Common household pesticides show up in treated wastewater and in Bay Area creeks, sometimes at levels that can harm sensitive aquatic life. So, water pollution prevention agencies have teamed up with participating Bay Area stores to reduce the risks associated with pesticide use. This fact sheet is part of a series of information pieces and store displays aimed at educating Bay Area residents about less-toxic pest management. Look for the “Our Water Our World” logo next to products in participating hardware stores and nurseries throughout the Bay Area.

Pest control strategies and methods described in this publication are consistent with integrated pest management (IPM) concepts, and are based on scientific studies and tests in actual home and garden settings. Use suggested products according to label directions and dispose of unwanted or leftover pesticides at a household hazardous waste collection facility or event. No endorsement of specific brand name products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, contact:
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(510) 524-2567
University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners in your area
(in the phone book)
Central Contra Costa Sanitary District
website: www.centralsan.org
University of California IPM website:
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu

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