

How to Get Rid of Fire Ants in Your Lawn

If you have ever stepped on a fire ant mound, you know why these invasive pests are dreaded in Florida. Their stings are painful, their mounds are unsightly, and their colonies can quickly take over your yard. Fortunately, with the right approach, you can reclaim your outdoor spaces. This comprehensive guide will walk you through managing fire ants in your Florida lawn, from identifying their mounds to executing a highly effective two-step control method.

Understanding the Fire Ant Threat in Florida

Florida's climate is practically tailor-made for fire ants. The combination of warm temperatures, high humidity, and frequent rain provides the perfect environment for these pests to thrive year-round. While there are native species of fire ants, the most problematic culprit in our state is the Red Imported Fire Ant (*Solenopsis invicta*). Originally from South America, this invasive species has spread across the southern United States, causing significant problems for homeowners, pets, and local wildlife.

Fire ants are incredibly adaptable and resilient. They build their nests in almost any type of soil, but they particularly favor open, sunny areas like lawns, pastures, and parks. They are also drawn to disturbed soils, which is why you often see new mounds popping up after landscaping work or heavy rains. During extreme heat or drought, fire ants will dig deeper into the ground to find moisture, making their mounds less visible but their colonies no less active. When the rainy season arrives, they build their mounds higher to protect the colony from flooding.

Identifying Fire Ants and Their Mounds

Before you can effectively treat a fire ant infestation, you need to be sure that fire ants are actually what you are dealing with. There are a few key characteristics that set them apart.

What Do Fire Ants Look Like?

Red imported fire ants are relatively small, typically ranging from one-eighth to one-quarter of an inch in length. They have a reddish-brown head and thorax, with a darker, almost black abdomen. Unlike some other ant species where all the workers are roughly the same size, fire ant colonies contain workers of varying sizes. If you observe a mound closely, you will likely see a mix of small, medium, and large ants working together.

The Characteristics of a Fire Ant Mound

Fire ant mounds are distinctive, although their appearance can vary depending on the soil type and weather conditions. In Florida's sandy soils, mounds often look like loose, fluffy piles of dirt that have been pushed up from the ground. They can range in size from a few inches across to over a foot in diameter, and they can be several inches high.

One of the most defining features of a fire ant mound is the lack of a visible entrance hole in the center. Unlike many native ants that have a clear entry point at the top of their nests, fire ants enter and exit their mounds through a network of underground tunnels that open several feet away from the main mound. This makes treating the mound directly a bit more challenging.

The Painful Reality of Fire Ant Stings

Perhaps the most definitive way to identify fire ants is by their sting. When a fire ant mound is disturbed, the ants respond with astonishing speed and aggression. They swarm out of the mound and climb onto whatever disturbed them.

What makes a fire ant attack so painful is their method. A fire ant will bite down with its jaws to anchor itself to your skin, and then use the stinger on its abdomen to inject venom. It can sting multiple times in a circular pattern. The venom contains a toxic alkaloid that causes an intense, burning sensation. Within a day or two, the sting sites typically develop into itchy, white, fluid-filled pustules that can take a week or more to heal.

The Proven Two-Step Control Method

When it comes to getting rid of fire ants, many homeowners make the mistake of only treating the visible mounds. While this might provide temporary relief, it rarely solves the problem. Fire ant colonies are vast and deep, and the queen—the sole reproducer of the colony—is safely tucked away far below the surface. If you don't kill the queen, the colony will simply rebuild or move a few feet away and start over.

The most effective approach for managing fire ants is the two-step method. This strategy involves first broadcasting a bait over your entire yard to target hidden colonies, followed by treating individual, visible mounds directly.

Step 1: Broadcast Baiting

The first step is to apply a fire ant bait across your entire lawn. Fire ant baits consist of a slow-acting insecticide mixed with a food attractant, typically soybean oil and corn grit. The foraging ants are drawn to the bait, pick it up, and carry it back to the colony. Because the insecticide is slow-acting, the ants have time to share the bait with the rest of the colony, including the queen, before they die.

Broadcasting bait is crucial because it treats the colonies you can see as well as the ones you cannot. It is also highly efficient, as the ants do the work of delivering the poison directly to the heart of the colony.

When applying broadcast bait, it is important to use a hand-held or push spreader to ensure even coverage. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions regarding application rates. More is not always better; applying too much bait can actually deter the ants from picking it up.

Step 2: Individual Mound Treatment

After applying the broadcast bait, you need to wait 7 to 10 days. This waiting period is critical because it gives the ants time to forage for the bait and distribute it throughout the colony. If you treat the mounds too soon, you risk killing the foraging ants before they can deliver the bait to the queen.

Once the waiting period has passed, you can move on to the second step: treating the individual mounds that are still active or that are located in high-traffic areas where they pose an immediate threat.

There are several options for individual mound treatments, including liquid drenches, granular treatments, and dusts.

Liquid Insecticide Drenches: This is one of the fastest ways to eliminate a mound. You mix a concentrated liquid insecticide with water in a large bucket or watering can, and then pour it over the mound. The goal is to saturate the entire mound and the soil beneath it, ensuring the liquid reaches the queen. It is important to pour the mixture slowly and evenly, starting around the perimeter of the mound and working your way toward the center, to prevent the ants from escaping.

Granular Treatments: These are different from the broadcast baits used in Step 1. Granular mound treatments are fast-acting contact insecticides. You sprinkle the granules over the mound and then water them in according to the product label. The water dissolves the granules and carries the insecticide down into the nest.

Dry Dust Treatments: Some products are applied as a dry dust directly to the mound. These can be effective, but they require the ants to walk through the dust and carry it into the colony. They are often less reliable than drenches or watered-in granules, especially in dry conditions.

Best Practices for Treating Fire Ants in Florida

Timing and technique are everything when it comes to fire ant control. Applying treatments at the wrong time of day or during the wrong season can significantly reduce their effectiveness.

The Best Times of Year to Treat

In Florida, fire ants are active year-round, but they are most active during the spring and fall when temperatures are moderate. These are the ideal seasons for applying broadcast baits. During the peak of summer, the extreme heat can cause the ants to forage deeper underground or only at night, making them less likely to find the bait.

The Best Time of Day to Treat

Fire ants typically forage when the soil surface temperature is between 70 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. In the heat of a Florida summer, this usually means early morning or late afternoon into the evening. If you apply bait during the middle of the day when

the sun is beating down, the bait can degrade quickly, and the ants are unlikely to be out looking for food.

A simple test to see if fire ants are actively foraging is to place a potato chip or a piece of hot dog on the ground near a mound. Check back in 20 to 30 minutes. If the food is covered in ants, it is a good time to apply bait.

Choosing the Right Products

When selecting a fire ant bait, look for products containing active ingredients like hydramethylnon, spinosad, or indoxacarb. These are proven to be highly effective against fire ants. For mound drenches, products containing bifenthrin, permethrin, or cypermethrin are common and effective choices.

Always read and follow the label instructions carefully. The label is the law, and using a product incorrectly can be ineffective and potentially harmful to the environment.

Safety Precautions and Natural Alternatives

When dealing with pesticides and stinging insects, safety must be your top priority, especially if you have children or pets who use the yard.

Protecting Your Family and Pets

Before applying any chemical treatments, ensure that children and pets are indoors. Keep them off the treated areas until liquid drenches have completely dried and any watered-in granules have been fully absorbed into the soil. When applying broadcast baits, it is generally safe for pets to re-enter the yard once the application is complete, as the amount of active ingredient is very low and spread thinly over a large area. However, always verify this with the specific product label.

When treating mounds, wear protective clothing, including long pants, closed-toe shoes, and socks. Tucking your pant legs into your socks can help prevent ants from crawling up your legs if you accidentally step too close to a mound.

Organic and Natural Approaches

If you prefer to avoid synthetic chemicals, there are organic and natural alternatives available, though they often require more frequent application and may take longer to achieve results.

Spinosad Baits: Spinosad is a natural substance made by a soil bacterium that can be toxic to insects. Baits containing spinosad are approved for organic use and are highly effective against fire ants when used as part of the two-step method.

Boiling Water: Pouring boiling water over a fire ant mound is a traditional, chemical-free method of control. Research shows that it is effective about 60% of the time. However, it requires a significant amount of boiling water (typically three gallons per mound) to reach the queen, and it poses a serious burn hazard to the person applying it. It will also kill any grass or plants it touches.

Diatomaceous Earth: Food-grade diatomaceous earth can be sprinkled around mounds or entry points. It works by damaging the exoskeleton of the ants, causing them to dehydrate. However, it is only effective as long as it remains dry, which makes it challenging to use reliably in Florida's humid and rainy climate.

What NOT to Do When Fighting Fire Ants

There are several common myths and mistakes when it comes to fire ant control that can actually make your problem worse.

Do Not Disturb the Mounds: Kicking, raking, or otherwise disturbing a mound before treating it is a bad idea. This will instantly trigger a defensive swarm, putting you at risk of multiple stings. Furthermore, disturbing the mound can alert the colony to danger, prompting them to move the queen deeper underground or relocate the mound entirely, making it harder to treat.

Never Use Gasoline or Petroleum Products: Pouring gasoline, diesel fuel, or motor oil on a fire ant mound is incredibly dangerous, highly toxic to the environment, and illegal. It contaminates the soil and groundwater and creates a severe fire hazard.

Avoid Mixing Baits with Other Chemicals: Do not mix fire ant bait with fertilizer or other pesticides. The strong odors of other chemicals can mask the attractive scent of the bait, causing the ants to ignore it.

Long-Term Management and Re-Treatment

Eradicating fire ants completely from a Florida property is nearly impossible. Even if you eliminate every colony in your yard, new queens from neighboring properties will eventually fly in and start new colonies. Therefore, managing fire ants is an ongoing process.

For long-term control, plan to apply a broadcast bait once or twice a year, typically in the spring and fall. Monitor your yard regularly for new mounds and treat them individually as they appear. By staying vigilant and sticking to the two-step method, you can keep fire ant populations down to a manageable level and enjoy your yard safely.

First Aid for Fire Ant Stings

Despite your best efforts, stings can happen. If you or a family member are stung by fire ants, act quickly. Move away from the mound immediately and brush the ants off your skin with a quick, sweeping motion. Do not try to wash them off with a hose, as they will simply clamp down harder.

Once the ants are removed, wash the affected area with soap and cold water. Applying a cold compress or ice pack can help reduce swelling and relieve the burning sensation. Over-the-counter antihistamines and hydrocortisone creams can also help manage the itching.

Resist the urge to pop the pustules that form. Popping them can lead to secondary bacterial infections. If a pustule breaks open on its own, keep the area clean and apply an antibiotic ointment.

In rare cases, fire ant stings can cause a severe allergic reaction known as anaphylaxis. Symptoms include difficulty breathing, swelling of the face or throat, dizziness, and a rapid drop in blood pressure. If you or someone else experiences these symptoms after a fire ant sting, seek emergency medical attention immediately.

When to Call a Professional

While DIY methods can be effective for minor infestations, there are times when it is best to call in the professionals. If you have a large property with dozens of mounds, if fire ants have invaded your home or electrical equipment, or if you or a family member are highly allergic to their stings, professional intervention is strongly recommended.

Pest control professionals have access to specialized equipment and commercial-grade products that are not available to the general public. They also have the expertise to accurately identify the extent of the infestation and develop a customized treatment plan that is both safe and effective.

If you're in Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, or St. Lucie County and need expert help, O'Hara Pest Control has been helping Florida homeowners since 1973. Call 561-655-9011 or visit oharapestcontrol.com.