Ants rarely feed directly on plants, but can cause damage in other ways. There are many species and they lead complicated lives with fascinating social structures.

### Pests and diseases

#### How to deal with ants

Ants feed off the honeydew excreted by various insects such as mealybugs, whitefly insects and aphids. Ants protect these pests by fending off their predators. However, some aphids won’t produce honeydew for the ants and in that instance the ants may eat them! Some ants, including yellow meadow ants, also farm aphids on the roots of plants.

#### Which ants sting you?

Ants found in the garden don’t usually sting or bite. If disturbed, ants will rush out and ‘attack’. They will attempt to bite but their jaws are too weak to do any damage. Red ants are able to sting.

#### Which ants cause problems indoors?

Black ants are the only species likely to venture indoors. They don’t live in houses but are just foraging for food. Blocking entrances and hiding sugary substances will often prevent an invasion.

#### How can you tell the different species apart?

Black ants are about 4mm long, with larger queens. Red ants are slightly larger, about 5mm. Mound ants are dull yellow, usually found in grass and sandy soil. Black wood ants are 6mm long and nest in the soil. Red wood ants make domed nests covered with pine needles. Pharaoh ants are red and yellow, tiny, with 3mm queens and 2mm-long workers. These ants have an unusual feature – they only survive in warm, indoor environments. Argentine ants are light to dark brown, with darker abdomens, about 4mm long, with queens twice this length.

#### What else do ants feed on besides honeydew?

Ants feed on sugary substances such as nectar, on small insects and even on other ants. Some species of ant also collect oilseeds from plants like buddleia, cyclamen, cabbage, heather, meconopsis, primula, radish, rhododendron and voila. Only one British species of ant eats seeds, and this isn’t found in gardens, but ants do eat seedcoats or other nutritious attachments that have evolved to attract them.

#### Why are ants often seen on plant stems?

If a plant is infested with insects that excrete honeydew, ants can often be seen collecting it and protecting the insects that produce this sugary substance. By eating the honeydew, ants actually help plants. Honeydew, while not damaging in itself, supports the growth of sooty moulds. These moulds have dark spores which turn the leaves black. The shading of the leaves by these spores reduces photosynthesis.

#### Why are ants called social insects?

Ants are related to bees and wasps and live in colonies. Each colony with worker ants excavating many worker ants - wingless females that cannot lay eggs. There will be one or more larger, eggs and queen ant which has been fertilised by winged males. The nest is their base for breeding and where their foraging expeditions start from.

#### Do ants damage plants?

Ants seldom feed directly on plants, but they can sometimes damage plants in other ways. When ant colonies build their nests under plants it disturbs the roots and deprives the plants of water. They can also bury plants by depositing soil on them when excavating nests – which can be very damaging in rockeries and flower pots. This is usually done by black ants (Lasius niger), though the common red ant (Myrmica rubra) may also be responsible. When ants are not directly underneath plants, they can help by loosening the soil, thus improving soil structure and drainage. In lawns, ant hills are a nuisance as they interfere with mowing. Mound ants or yellow meadow ants (Lasius flavus) are the worst offenders. Their mounds are, however, usually flattened by passing feet and mowers. These ants prefer lawn edges where there is less disturbance. Ants feed off the honeydew excreted by various insects such as mealybugs, whitefly insects and aphids. Ants protect these pests by fending off their predators. However, some aphids won’t produce honeydew for the ants and in that instance the ants may eat them! Some ants, including yellow meadow ants, also farm aphids on the roots of plants.

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### Expert advice

#### Are bait stations effective?

Yes, but you must keep replacing the baits as long as the ants visit. Baits work best for black ants, as other species don’t take them so enthusiastically. They’re worth trying where you can’t find the nests where you want to get rid of the ants. Some species are more susceptible to baits than others.

#### What can organic gardeners use to solve ant problems?

On uncultivated land, boiling water can be poured into nests. There is also a nematode-based biological control sold online and by mail order as Nemaysy No. Ants. This doesn’t kill ants, but just encourages them to move elsewhere. However, when we asked ant-plagued Which? Gardening members to try it, most were dissatisfied in varied locations. The nest contains many tunnels, full of worker ants. In winter the nest becomes dormant and the workers stay inside. When spring arrives they go out to search for food. Some species just forage randomly, but others lay scent trails to the food supply for other ants to follow. Pharaoh ants don’t mate in flight. A queen leaves to form a new nest, with workers carrying larvae and pupae. New queen leavers also form a new nest, with workers carrying larvae and pupae. Ant nests can exist for many years, and the worker ants excavating the nest, feeding the queen and larvae, and fighting off predators. Each summer new winged forms are produced.

#### How should I get rid of ants?

If plants are seriously damaged, or if ants are a problem inside the house, it’s better to follow the ants back to their nest rather than where you see them. The nest can then be treated directly, and this saves having to use insecticides in the house or on plants.

#### How can I get rid of ant nests?

Ant nests are best broken up with a fork and treated with an insecticide such as a drench or dust containing bendiocarb or deltamethrin.

#### What can organic gardeners use to solve ant problems?

Ants can be a problem at times, when they can build nests in all sorts of places. Argentine ants are light to dark brown, with darker abdomens, about 4mm long, with queens twice this length. They only survive in warm, indoor environments. Argentine ants are light to dark brown, with darker abdomens, about 4mm long, with queens twice this length.

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