



RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS

Solenopsis invicta

 ← Actual Size = 1/8 to 1/4 inch

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA) is a very aggressive stinging insect that is native to South America. RIFA can interfere with outdoor activities, cause stinging victims to seek medical attention, harm wildlife, and damage agricultural crops and landscaping.

RIFA was introduced into the southeastern United States during the 1930s. It is now established throughout most of the southeast and as far west as Texas and Oklahoma. Occasionally, RIFA is introduced into California. In Santa Barbara County, infestations occurred at wholesale nurseries in Carpinteria during 1988 and again in 1998. Both infestations were eradicated by county and state agricultural authorities. A much larger infestation is occurring in Orange County, Calif. Apparently introduced into a wholesale nursery, this infestation appears to have gone undetected for 4 to 5 years. RIFA is now widely established in Orange County. An eradication effort is underway, however this infestation greatly increases the likelihood of further introductions throughout California.

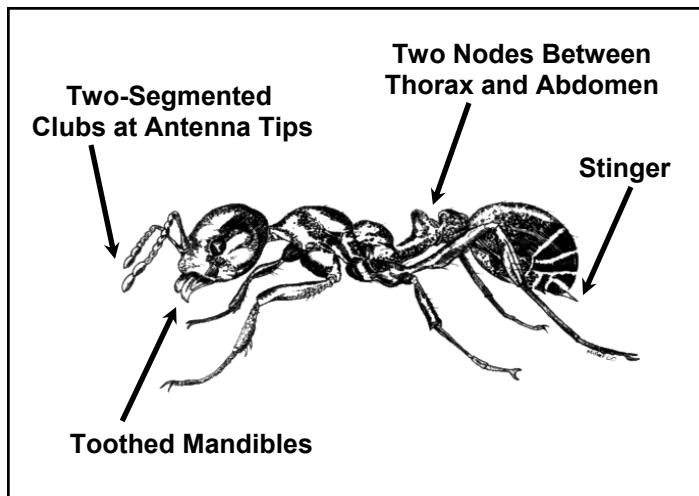
HEALTH CONCERNS

Red Imported Fire Ants are considered dangerous because, unlike most ants, this species delivers venomous stings that produce immediate pain, a burning/itching sensation, and raised pustules several days later. When a nest is disturbed, large numbers of worker ants erupt from the surface of the mound to defend the colony. An unsuspecting victim can be rapidly covered with stinging ants within seconds. The venom is relatively toxic and potentially lethal to pets, wildlife, and sensitized humans. Hypersensitive individuals can go into life-threatening anaphylactic shock and require emergency medical treatment.



DESCRIPTION

The Red Imported Fire Ant ranges in size from 1/8 to 1/4 inch in length. They are shiny and dark red in color with a dark brown abdomen. They possess one pair of toothed mandibles for grasping the skin before stinging. Two nodes located between the abdomen and thorax are characteristic of the species. The tips of the antennae are two-segmented clubs.



continued on back

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

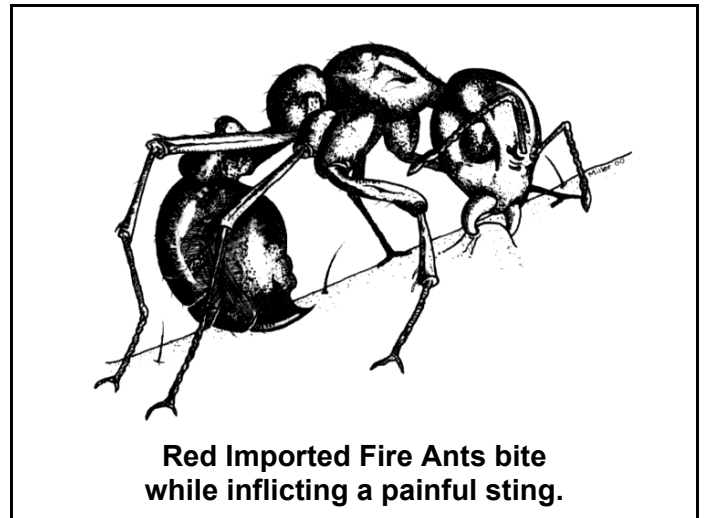
RIFA can have an adverse impact on native wildlife. They often displace native ant species and other forms of insect life. Other small ground dwelling wildlife, especially the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds, are vulnerable to being attacked and stung to death or being driven from the area.

Fire Ants can damage agricultural crops and landscaping by gnawing into roots, stems, buds, and fruit of plants. Young trees may be girdled by the removal of outer bark from trunks and roots. The aesthetic appeal of lawns, golf courses, and landscaping can be ruined by numerous ant mounds.

WHERE THEY CAN BE FOUND

The colony or nest is often very distinctive and easily recognized as a loosely compacted, finely granular dome (up to 18 inches in diameter and six to ten inches high) of soil that resembles a “gopher mound.” RIFA can build nests almost anywhere, but they prefer open, sunny areas such as pastures, parks, lawns, golf courses, meadows, and cultivated fields. Nests are occasionally located in or around yard plants, rotting logs, stumps, and trees, or up against the walls of buildings. Fire Ants need water to survive and are often found near creeks, rivers, ponds, lakes, runoff ditches, and other bodies of water. They may tunnel to the underground water table if surface water is unavailable.

Fire Ants often nest close to homes and other buildings. They may enter buildings to forage for food and water, and sometimes will nest inside wall voids or rafters. Fire Ants are strongly attracted to electrical current, often infesting electrical equipment and utility housings, where they can chew on insulation and move soil in, thereby causing short circuits and other problems. Nests may also be located under cracked pavement. By removing dirt from underneath sidewalks and roadways, RIFA can create or aggravate structural problems.



BIOLOGY

Mature Fire Ant colonies contain 100,000 to 500,000 workers. Several to many queens may live in one nest. Usually several hundred winged ants (males and young queens) also inhabit a nest.

Queen ants can live 7 years or more. Workers normally live about 5 weeks, but can survive much longer. Winged ants live in the nest until their mating flight, which usually occurs during spring or fall afternoons following a rainy period. Males die after mating. Fertilized queens find a suitable nest site, shed their wings, and dig chambers to start new colonies.

CONTROL

Call the Mosquito and Vector Management District or the Santa Barbara County Agricultural Commissioner's Office if you suspect that you have found Red Imported Fire Ants. RIFA is a quarantined pest that is not known to occur in Santa Barbara County, and is subject to eradication whenever found. The presence of very aggressive stinging red ants is the most obvious clue to suspect RIFA. **DO NOT** disturb suspected RIFA nests or try to destroy the nests yourself.

MOSQUITO and VECTOR MANAGEMENT DISTRICT of Santa Barbara County

DISTRICT OFFICE: 2450 Lillie Ave. * MAIL: P.O. Box 1389
Summerland, CA 93067

TELEPHONE: (805) 969-5050 * E-MAIL: mvmdistrict@mvmdistrict.org

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Take a look at our Public Information Website: www.mvmdistrict.org