

What's Growing On?

BASTROP COUNTY MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

May 2023

Fire Ant Treatments

By Wizzie Brown

Ways to manage fire ants can be broken into two basic categories: broadcast treatments and individual mound treatments. Individual mound treatments treat one mound at a time and are labor intensive, requiring you to search and find every fire ant mound for treatment, and can result in more pesticide being applied to the environment. Broadcast treatments spread product (granular or bait) over a large area using specialized equipment.

Individual mound treatments include pouring boiling water onto the mound, using insecticide mound drenches, spreading insecticide granules over top of the mound and watering them in, sprinkling insecticidal dusts on top of the mound or using bait-formulated insecticides around the perimeter of the mound. Sometimes people like to concoct or recommend home remedies using ingredients from the kitchen; most of these do not kill fire ants but cause them to move their mound 1–2 feet away.

Bait-formulated insecticides most often consist of a defatted corn cob grit coated with soybean oil; the active ingredient—what kills the pest—is dissolved in the soybean oil. The soybean oil is what is attractive and consumed by the fire ants, as fire ants do not eat solid food. Worker ants collect bait as a food source and take it back to the colony to share with other ants, including the queen(s). Depending on the active ingredient, bait may cause the queen to either die or be unable to produce viable eggs, leading to gradual death of the colony. When using baits, results may be slower to ob-

Save Money When Buying Mystic Spires Blue Salvia

By Howard Nemerov

Horticulture professionals claim that *Salvia 'Mystic Spires'* is perhaps two feet tall and 18 inches wide at maturity. Patent holder Ball Seed says so in their marketing literature.¹ Large, established grower Monrovia agrees.² But this alleged size is worth reconsidering because it could save you hundreds of dollars in landscaping costs.

Texas Superstar® is correct in that this variety is an improvement over *Salvia 'Indigo Spires'*, with denser growth and more flowers.³ In my experience, it has greater cold hardiness and is a reliable perennial with a longer blooming season. But size mattered when designing a landscape in our walkway beds that vary from four to six feet wide.

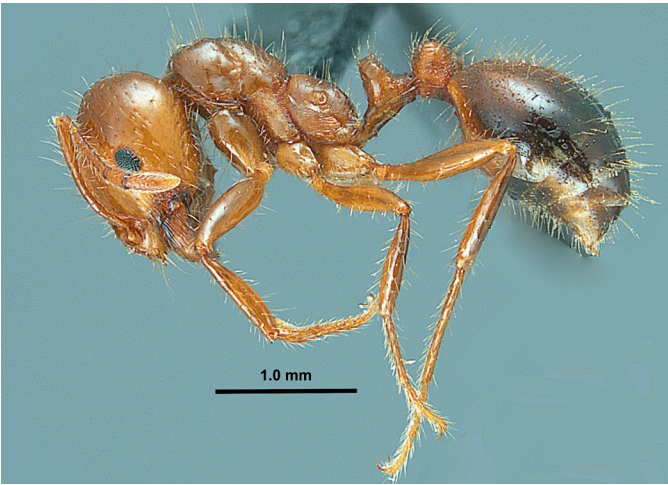
Eighteen inches wide and two feet tall? Maybe with poor soil, no mulch, and sun hammering down all summer forcing plants into survival mode. If you've improved your soil by maintaining a three-inch layer of organic mulch, plan for

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(Photo by Mississippi Entomological Museum/Joe A. MacGown)

serve when compared to individual mound treatments, but can provide 80-90% suppression for 12-18 months. A bonus to broadcasting baits is that the amount of active ingredient is generally very small: baits are usually broadcast at a rate of 1–1.5 pounds per acre, which places less chemical into the environment.

With any pesticide treatment, *read and follow all label instructions*. Make sure to water in the pesticide **if the label instructs you to do so**. Failure to water in chemicals when recommended by the label does an inadequate job of killing the ants. Baits should not be watered in or used before a rainfall event; baits will not be picked up by ants if they get wet.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas AgriLife Extension Service

Program Specialist at 512.854.9600.

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(*Salvia 'Mystic Spires'*, Continued from page 1)

giant Mystic Spires over three feet tall and wide. In the picture on the left, Mystic Spires towers over mature, foot-tall *Zinnia haageana* 'Persian Carpet' on the lower right and *Agave victoriae-reginae* on the left. I measured it in 2022 at 42 inches wide and 42 inches from top of mulch to tip of flower spike.



On the right is the same plant in mid-April 2023, already 42 inches wide and over three feet tall. I laid a 57-inch shovel in front to provide a sense of scale. Your first savings will come from ignoring the experts and planting this farther back in your design, instead of having to dig and reposition plants and risk losing some from root shock.



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On the left is an attempt to group Mystic Spires to create a larger focal point. In 2022, I planted three #2 plants around the previous year's single plant on the other side of the walkway, following "expert" guidelines and planting on 2-foot centers. The established plant crowded them out, forcing them to lean away to gain sun exposure. This year, the only one still alive was farthest from the original plant.



Flowers much-loved by pollinators.

The good news is you'll save lots of money when mass planting Mystic Spires. A price check on April 15, 2023 at a local retailer was \$21.96 apiece; \$23.77 with sales tax. At the original 18-inch spacing and using a triangular/intensive spacing, it would take 49 plants to cover 100 square feet but only 9 plants at 42-inch spacing; a \$950 savings.⁴

Well-prepared soil makes for happy plants which grow larger and flower more profusely, and saves money in the long run. That's certainly the case with *Salvia 'Mystic Spires'*. Now I can sit back and watch the hummingbird, bee and butterfly show all season long.

[All photos by Howard Nemerov]

Endnotes

¹ "Mystic Spires Salvia". Ball Seed. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.ballseed.com/PlantInfo/?phid=054900001016369>

² "Mystic Spires Blue Salvia." Monrovia Nursery. Accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.monrovia.com/mystic-spires-blue-salvia-07330.html>

³ "Mystic Spires Blue Salvia." Texas Superstar®. Accessed April 29, 2022. <https://texassuperstar.com/plants/salviamysticspires/index.html>

⁴ "Plant Spacing Calculator." Omni Calculator. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.omnicalculator.com/biology/plants>



Volunteering

Master Gardeners volunteer in the community to teach others about horticulture. We follow the research-based recommendations of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Members who complete 50 hours of volunteer service in the year after training earn the designation "Texas Master Gardener." We use our title only when engaged in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension activities.