

## **Controlling Fire Ants**

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

If you spend any time outside, you have probably experienced the sneak attack of fire ants. You know, that first painful bite followed immediately by five or six more just as your brain realizes that you have found a fire ant mound in your lawn or perhaps your flower beds. As you dance away shaking and swatting them off, being bitten more every second, you are thinking about two things; the total eradication of fire ants, and hoping neighbors did not see your impromptu performance. Now that you have found them, what do you do with them? If you are like me, you immediately head for the garage and look for anything that is labeled for killing ants. While this may give you immediate satisfaction it will not produce results for an extended period of time. From the end of August to early October is the perfect time to apply the "Texas Two-Step Method" of fire ant control to your property. The two step method involves broadcasting an ant bait (step one) and then treating individual mounds in areas where they are most troublesome with a contact poison (step two).

Baits have several advantages over the quicker acting contact poisons. Most baits are cheaper, ants are controlled for a longer period of time, and they pose very little toxic hazard to people or the environment. Their main disadvantage is that they are slow acting, taking from 2-4 weeks or 2-6 months depending on the type applied, to have maximum effect. For this reason, step two, applying a poison to the mounds in high traffic areas or around the foundation of your house will provide the quick kill of the most troublesome ants. It is the baits that disrupt the life cycle of the colony and will keep the ant population down over a longer period of time. When applied properly, baits need only be applied twice a year. Step two can be applied throughout the year as needed.

To work baits must be applied properly for the maximum effect. Baits must be picked up and carried back to the mound. Ants forage when the soil temperature is between 75 and 90 degrees. Place a small amount of the bait out and check back in 30 minutes. If the bait is gone, or is being carried away, go ahead and apply the bait. Don't spread bait if rain is expected within 24 hours. Remember to turn off your sprinklers for at least 24 hours and do not apply if there is heavy dew. Always use fresh bait. Fire ant baits are oil based and will go rancid quickly if left open. For that reason it is a good idea to only buy enough for one treatment. Baits can last up to a year, but if they are rancid the ants will not pick them up. It is also important not to disturb the mounds before treating with baits. When the mounds are disturbed fire ants will simply move. This means do not mow your lawn before spreading bait and don't mow for at least 3 days after baiting. If you have mounds that are a nuisance wait several days after baiting before applying the contact poison. Fire ants are mobile and will simply relocate after an area has been treated, for this reason it is a good idea to mobilize your neighbors so that surrounding areas are all treated at the same time. Be sure that any vacant lots and common areas are also treated. Remember you can not legally treat anyone's property except your own; not even with permission unless you are a licensed professional. It may be necessary to hire a professional to treat vacant lots and common areas after obtaining permission from owners. When selecting bait, take into consideration things like where it will be used. If you have a vegetable garden or compost pile it may require a different type than one for a strictly ornamental landscape. Fire ant baits are easily applied with hand held seed spreaders. Most baits require 1 to 1 ½ pounds per acre, be sure to adjust the spreader accordingly. More is not better, just more expensive. It is not necessary to coat the grass with the bait. Use care as with any pesticide, and be sure not to apply bait or contact poison to water. Also when using a spreader, do not get bait on sidewalks or streets as the granules can be washed away and into the sewer systems. When using any chemical read the entire label before using and be sure to follow the directions exactly.

For more information on which type baits are best for your property, visit Texas A&M's Texas Red Imported Fire Ant Project website. The list of lawn and garden publications available there includes "Texas Two-Step Method, Publication L-5070", "Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control, Publication B-6099", and "Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Area, Publication B-6043". You can also contact the County Extension Office at 1-800-460-2355 ext 5305 or at 933-5305 to be put in touch with a Fire Ant Specialist. You can also email questions to [bell-tx@tamu.edu](mailto:bell-tx@tamu.edu)

Regardless of which bait you treat with, fire ants will eventually reinvade your space. Twice yearly applications of bait, one in spring and one in fall, done properly and combined with "step two" applications to individual mounds throughout the year, can keep the pesky critters under control and on the run. My special thanks to Bell County Master Gardener and Fire Ant Specialist, Connie Waters, for her advice when writing this article.