

Leaf Cutting Ants

Leaf cutting ants are reddish-brown with three pairs of spines on the thorax and one pair of spines on the back of the head. Workers come in various sizes, and some can be up to ½ an inch long. Mounds can become large and are sometimes clustered together with other mounds giving this ant a nickname of “town ant”. Leaf cutter ant mounds have a central opening and often a crater shape at the top.



Leaf cutting ant.



Leaf cutting ant mound.

Cut ants typically forage when temperatures are cooler, and often become active in cooler periods of the year. During the summer, they may forage at night or in the morning. They can sometimes cause complete defoliation of plants or small trees overnight. Leaf cutting ants remove leaves and buds from plants in the landscape. The ants do not eat the plant pieces, but instead, take it back to the colony and feed the vegetation to a fungus garden. They tend a species of particular fungus and weed out any other fungus from the garden. The fungus is the food source of the ants and mated females carry a piece of the fungus with them when they leave to start a new colony.

Colonies exist for years and can exceed over two million ants. It is not unusual for a single colony to cover an acre of land. Colonies are usually found in well drained, sandy or loamy soils.

Plants can be temporarily protected by using spray adhesives around the base of the plant. Adhesives should be refreshed often when dirt or debris accumulates. Temporary protection can also be provided with contact insecticidal spray or dusts. If mounds are located in an area, the bait product labeled for leaf cutter ants, Amdro Ant Block, can be broadcast with a hand-held spreader around the mound area. If no mounds are seen, then residual sprays and dusts can be used along foraging trails and around openings.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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