

The ants are marching in. They seem to be about a month early. We've been getting several calls a week at the Extension Office. Our own kitchen is visited by Odorous House Ants each year. They're very tiny and black. Many people call them sugar ants. They're called "odorous" because they release a coconut scent when squished or smashed. One year, in frustration, I did indeed use my finger to smooch a bunch of them as they came pouring through the cracks around the kitchen window. When I later came near my kitty, she turned up her nose and made a face as if to say, "Eeeewwww!"

There are probably as many types of ants as you could stretch your mind to imagine. Washington State University Extension has four publications on the most common ants encountered by homeowners: EB818, Carpenter Ants, Biology and Control; EB0929, Thatching Ants; EB1382, Moisture Ants; EB1514 Pharaoh Ants; and EB1550 Odorous House Ant. Each publication shows photos of the ants and describes their life cycles and how to control them. Ant identification is based on color, size and number of segments in their antennae. They have a highly evolved social system and are actually fascinating creatures.

The ants we encounter the most as homeowners and gardeners are: carpenter ants, moisture ants and odorous house ants. Each fall or early spring make sure you caulk around windows, doors and vents to eliminate some of the entrance points for ant invasions. To avoid carpenter ants site woodpiles far away from your home. Check around and under your home to avoid standing water around the foundation and anywhere wood touches the soil. Inside the house wipe down cupboards, shelves and counters and seal all food supplies in containers.

Humans have a habit of building houses in the paths of the ants. You'll probably notice ants in the same places each year like the ants visiting our kitchens. Usually they come to visit for a short period of weeks and then disappear until another year. They're usually looking for queens to mate and food for the colonies. If ants become a problem it's usually best to hire a licensed professional. If you ever hear tapping or scratching in your home's walls it could be carpenter ants. You may also find sawdust deposits indicating carpenter ants. Other ants can usually be followed to their nests for eradication. If you choose to use a product to solve the infestation you'll want to time the treatments to the ants' life cycle. In any insect problem it's critical to learn the life cycle of the insect being controlled. Products will only work at the right time in the insect's life cycle. And, if the species of ant isn't listed on the label, the product will not work.

The WSU Publications listed describe our local ants thoroughly giving very useful information to help homeowners make an educated decision. Remember, usually, you won't have to do anything. If you have a really critical infestation you'll want to call in a licensed professional for assistance.

We've also received calls about caterpillars. Many homeowners notice caterpillar tents in fir trees. These caterpillars are Spotted Tiger Moth larvae. The spotted tiger moth caterpillars are usually on the very tips of the fir trees. They do little damage and at this time of year even though the tree tips become bare and from a distance look brown, new needles emerge in the spring. You won't have to do anything to solve this problem, unless you're growing trees for sale. We had a row of fir trees along our property and over the years we watched the Spotted Tiger Moth caterpillars move from tree to tree. All of the trees are still thriving and all the denuding disappeared with new evergreen growth.

Other callers are concerned about tent caterpillars especially after last year. While you're out in your gardens cleaning up, pruning and planting be on the lookout for the gray and brown Styrofoam looking egg cases wrapped around twiglets. Pick them off. It's all right to dispose of them in the trash, the compost bin or even drop them on the ground. Once exposed to the elements, eggs aren't viable. Even if a few survive, the tiny baby caterpillars die in the elements or by predation before making it to a food source. *Bacillus thurengiensis* Bt sprayed once every 7-10 days over several weeks will kill tent caterpillars if they become a problem this year. Follow the label directions always. To be effective Bt needs to be applied early in the season while the caterpillars are actively feeding. Call the Extension Office at 360-337-7157 for more information about tent caterpillars.

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