

A Bug's World – Carpenter Ants

Carpenter ants are among the largest of ants; most worker ants range in size from 1/4 to 1/2 inch with queens being as large as 3/4 inch. *Camponotus modoc*, the western carpenter ant, is the most common one found infesting structure in western Washington. This species is black except for the reddish legs. Ants have a constriction (thin waist) between their thorax (where legs originate) and abdomen. The carpenter ants are easily recognized by the thoracic dorsum, which is evenly convex when viewed from the side. Carpenter ants may be winged or wingless. The winged adults, male and female, overwinter in the nest and leave the following spring. (If winged, there are two sets of membranous wings that extend beyond the tip of the abdomen.) The front wings are larger than the rear wings. It is extremely important that your problem ant is properly identified. If unsure of the species of the ant invading your house, take a specimen to your Master Gardener office for identification; be sure to take several of the larger ants for identification.

Carpenter ants are efficient wood-destroying insects normally inhabiting logs, stumps and hollow trees and become pests when they move indoors. Unlike termites, carpenter ants do not feed on wood; they burrow into the wood constructing their nests and extruding the sawdust which is one signal that carpenter ants are present. Since the carpenter ants don't eat wood they must leave the nest in search of food. They eat insects, aphid honeydew, tree sap, human food and pet food. Another sign of the presence of carpenter ant infestation is a large number of worker ants. Most carpenter ants establish their initial nest in decayed or wet wood and extend their burrowing into sound wood which can result in serious damage to a structure.

The presence of an occasional ant in the house, or the presence of one or two winged queens during swarming times (spring) does not mean you have an infestation. The occasional ant may be a scout looking for food. Numerous large worker ants or a large number of winged adults in the house are a good sign of an infestation. Large numbers of ants wandering around outside your house is not necessarily an indication of infestation. They may be looking for an area to set up a satellite colony. The best indicator of a serious infestation is the presence of sawdust accumulating in piles or caught in spider webbing. Carpenter ants often produce a rustling or tapping sound when you tap on wood near the nest. A stethoscope or inverted water glass is useful to amplify the sounds. The presence of foraging trails is another clue. They lead away from the house, and are easiest to locate between sunset and sunrise from April to mid-October.

When the ants in a parent colony need room to expand, they form satellite colonies in nearby structures. Once you find the colony in a structure, finding a trail will lead you to the parent colony. Treating the parent colony as well as the satellite colony (or colonies) provides the most effective control. There is no biological control for carpenter ants. Chemical treatment consists of direct treatment of the colony or colonies and a perimeter spray of the infested structure. You should contact your local Master Gardener office for the latest information on pesticide application.

Carpenter ant infestation can be prevented by taking the following measures:

- correcting moisture problems around the house
- trimming shrubs and trees away from the house
- replacing water-damaged or decayed wood
- removing stumps and dead trees near the house;
- storing firewood away from the house and off the ground
- before building carefully inspect the area and eliminate carpenter ant colonies

References

WSU Extension Bulletins

EB 0472, [Household Insects and Their Control](#)

EM033E, [Identification and Habits of Key Ant Pests of Washington](#)

EB 0818, [Carpenter Ants: Their Biology and Control](#)

EB 1814, [A Key to Identification of Pacific Northwest Wood Destroying Pests Based on Wood Damage](#)

Other WSU Publications

[Carpenter Ants](#), Gardening in Western Washington

Extension Tapes on Carpenter Ants are available by calling 1-800-325-6165 and asking for extension 3415. Request EB1261, Carpenter Ants, or EB1222, Choosing and Exterminator.