

Least-Toxic Ant Control



ant control

Q: How do I get rid of ants in my house?

A: The small black ants (Argentine ants) that commonly enter houses in California are sometimes hard to get rid of, but the steps described below will most often work.

- Remove the ants you see.
- Remove the attraction.
- Wipe up the ants' foraging trails.
- Set out ant traps with borax or boric acid based bait stations.

If you can follow these steps religiously for 2-4 weeks, the ants generally cut their losses and move on to another, more easily accessible source of food. At that point, the key to ant control becomes prevention: wipe up food spills immediately, wipe down food prep surfaces with soapy water, remove garbage frequently, clean food debris out of sinks, rinse dirty dishes, sweep and mop floors regularly.

Even if you get discouraged, don't resort to insecticide sprays, because they kill only the 1% to 10% of the ants in a colony that are out foraging for food, leaving the rest of the colony intact and ready to take their place. Meanwhile you now have toxic chemicals dispersed in the air you breathe and filming the surfaces in the room that you, children, and pets are likely to touch.

FIRST STEPS

Remove the ants you see.

You can use your vacuum to quickly get rid of the ants already in your house. Vacuum them up, along with some cornstarch, so that they suffocate in the vacuum. If they're nesting in a potted plant, take it outside and flood it several times. If they're in the garbage can,

empty it outside and wash it down with a citrus-based cleaner.

Remove the attraction.

Food. Put the most ant-attractive food items (honey, sugar, sweet liqueurs, cough syrup, etc.) into the fridge or into jars with rubber gaskets and lids that close with a metal clamp. Unless the lid of a screw-top jar has a rubber seal, ants can follow the threads right into the jar. A couple of layers of waxed paper (not plastic wrap) between the jar and the lid often work pretty well as a barrier, once the lid is screwed down tightly. Transfer other foods, such as cookies in open boxes, to plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Put butter in the fridge. Note: paper and cardboard boxes are not ant-proof.

Garbage. Put kitchen scraps into a tightly-sealed plastic container. Throw nonrecyclable food containers (plastic ice cream cartons, meat wrapping paper, etc.) in an outside trash can. Wash glass, tin, and aluminum food containers thoroughly before tossing them into an indoor recycling bin.

Kitchen counters, floors and cabinets.

Using hot soapy water, wipe down kitchen and appliance surfaces where sticky hands or food spills may have left some ant-attractive residue: kitchen counters, floors, cabinet doors and handles, fridge handle, stove knobs, sides of toaster, blender, etc. Immediately mop up food spills and sweep up food crumbs.

Pet food. Create a "moat" for pet food by placing the food bowl in a somewhat larger shallow tray or pie pan filled with water. Or feed your pet only what it will eat immediately, then wash the bowl.

factsheet

Least-Toxic Ant Control (continued)

Erase the ants' foraging trails.

Erase the chemical trail that the ants have laid down and are following by washing it with a citrus-based cleaner, available at grocery and hardware stores. Look for a citrus-based cleaner that is concentrated and viscous, and apply it, undiluted, to the point of entry. Diatomaceous earth can also be used as a barrier, and many people have success with ground cloves, cinnamon, or cayenne powders as barriers. Tap a line of the powder you choose along ant entry points or along the perimeter of where you don't want them to enter (your kitchen).

Set out boric-acid or borax ant bait stations

Set out ant bait stations near the ants' entry points and/or foraging trails, so that the ants find them quickly, ingest the bait, and carry it back to their nest, where they feed it to – and kill – the rest of the colony. We recommend that the active ingredient in the bait be boric acid or borax, because these ingredients are the least toxic to mammals and because they work slowly, allowing the forager ants to spread it to the queens and through the colony, before the foragers themselves die. If you can't find pre-made borax or boric acid bait in a local hardware or variety store, you can make it at home with this recipe: 3 cups water, 1 cup sugar, 4 teaspoons boric acid. Place a quarter-sized puddle of the mixture on a piece of cardboard and set it out in the areas the ants most often frequent.

FOLLOW-UP STEPS

In addition to continuing the good sanitation practices mentioned at the beginning of this guide, you can take steps to exclude ants from your house by sealing as many entry points as possible: weather-strip doors and use caulking to fill gaps in window and door frames and around baseboards, pipes, sinks, toilets, and electrical outlets. Prune trees and shrubs away from exterior walls, to prevent ants using them as a bridge into the house. Because Argentine ants are attracted to moisture, seal leaks and fix leaky pipes.

RECOMMENDED PRODUCTS AND SOURCES

For Argentine ants in the house, we recommend the following products:

- Terro-Ant Killer (5.4% borax in a sugar solution)
- Diatomaceous earth (can be used in an outside environment)
- Orange Guard (works very well as a repellent)

Warning! You may come across another product packaged as sticks of chalk and labeled "Miraculous Insecticide Chalk" in English and Chinese. It may be available in Chinese variety or grocery stores, although it is illegal in the U.S. has not been registered and approved as an insecticide. We do not recommend using this product. If you are tempted to use this product, wear gloves when applying it as a barrier at ant entry points. The active ingredient in the chalk is a pyrethroid, which is also toxic when inhaled, so avoid breathing the chalk dust.

RELATED ECOLOGY CENTER MATERIALS

- The Ecology Center has many great books on least-toxic pest control in the library
- We sell Terro-Ant Killer, boric acid, diatomaceous earth, and Orange Guard in the Ecology Center store

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Bio-Integral Resource Center (BIRC) - Hotline provides information on least-toxic pest control. 510-524-2567
- Berthold-Bond, Annie, Better Basics for the Home, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1999.