

Diggin' in the Dirt: Ants on the Move

By Chip Bubl
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The OSU Extension Office is fully reopened. Mask still required inside. The best way to reach me directly is with the email below.

Events:

Native Plant sale: The Scappoose Bay Watershed Council is holding their spring native plant sale on Saturday, April 9, from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm at their nursery located on the east side of Scappoose High School. Great selection and prices. For more information, go to <https://www.scappoosebay-wc.org/native-plant-nursery/>.

Local Bee Group meetings: On Saturday, March 19, Carolyn Breece from OSU Honeybee Diseases Lab will present a workshop. It is free and people need to preregister. It will be at Chief Concomly Park in Scappoose under the gazebo from 1:00-3:00 pm. Register at columbiacountyoregonbeekeepers@gmail.com

On Saturday, April 2, the Bee Group will host another Bee Class from 9:00 am-noon indoors at the Extension office in St. Helens and in the afternoon with bee hives. Cost to be determined. Use the same email above to get more information and to register.

On Thursday April 7 at 6:00 pm there will be a Zoom event with Paul Stromberg, President of Portland Metro Beekeepers. He will talk on queen rearing for backyard beekeepers and, as a sideline, commercial beekeepers. To get the Zoom link, email columbiacountyoregonbeekeepers@gmail.com

Ants on the move

I am going to be optimistic and assume we are soon going to get warmer weather. This always brings out ants and generates calls about those ants. The most common calls we receive in the Extension office concern either the tiny “sugar” ants (also known as “ants in some less refined circles), harvester ants, or the carpenter ants.

Let’s dispose of the sugar-type ants up front. They are small, a terrible nuisance, and difficult to eradicate, but they do no structural damage to your house. There are several species of very tiny ants. They live under rocks, cracks in foundations, under boards, or in the ground and they will work diligently to find their way into your kitchen. The best solution is to experiment with a series of baits until you find the one that works on your species.

Harvester ants, also known as thatching ants, build those large mounds and will bite if threatened. But they don’t go looking for trouble and generally perform some valuable cleanup services around the landscape. They may even repel carpenter ants though that isn’t fully confirmed. Generally, control isn’t necessary or desirable. They will,

sometimes, eat flowers of apples and pears. A sticky barrier on the trunk like Tangle-foot™ should stop that.

The carpenter ants, however, are another story. They do lots of structural damage in Columbia County and can be very hard to control. They prefer wet wood but will work in dry wood quite comfortably. They do not eat the wood for food but instead make their home in it. Therefore, they have to go outside to collect seeds, succulent big (like termite queens) or small insects, and aphid “honeydew”, a particular delicacy. In fact, carpenter ants will defend their aphid “ranches” on trees, Canada thistle, or other plants from aphid predators including yellow jackets.



We have several carpenter ant species. Ants can be either all black (most common) or a designer combination of black and red. But don’t confuse it with the mound-building and harmless thatching ant, which is also black and red. Carpenter ants have a smooth concave thorax (directly behind the head) with a single “spike” (called a petiole) between the thorax and abdomen. Carpenter ant size is variable. Ants grow with the food supply. If food was limiting during their formative weeks, they may be quite small. If times were good, their size increases. It is not uncommon to have a range of different sized ants in the same colony. If you need them identified, bring them into the Extension office.

Colonies can be small with less than 1,000 individuals up to colonies with over 50,000 ants. Main colonies are often located outside in stumps, rotten fence posts, or unused firewood piles. These often contain the queen. Treating these colonies is crucial for control success. Satellite colonies can form inside the house. These may not have a queen. If they don’t, they gain new members from the main colony outdoors.

It takes some detective work to find inside or outside colonies. Late night observation on warm summer evenings can be helpful. Tell your neighbors what you are doing before you follow the ants with a flashlight. Finding lots of larger ants persistently in one area of your house is also an indication of a problem.

Here are some steps that a homeowner might take to reduce carpenter ant problems:

1. Treat wall voids with boric acid, *Timbor*, or desiccating dusts. This is especially useful during new construction.
2. Treatment generally consists of putting down an insecticide barrier around the house (along the foundation and out about two feet) and removing all vegetation touching the house so they have to cross the insecticide barrier to get to your house. **Be careful to read and follow all label instructions when using any insecticide.**
3. Control moisture under the house and in the wall voids. While carpenter ants don’t require moisture like dampwood termites do, they prefer to start in moisture-damaged wood.
4. Prune and maintain vegetation at least 18 inches away from the walls of the house. Ants can cross above foundation insecticide treatments on plant limbs and wires. You can also reduce nearby aphid populations.
5. Treat outside nests if you find them.

Wood that has been damaged should be replaced and if the colony can be located, should be treated. Severe infestations or unusual situations (like vaulted wood ceilings) should receive commercial treatment.

Row covers available again: Interest in row covers continues to increase. Row covers are made from a gauzy fabric. They provide frost protection and more warmth in the daytime. Our material this year is lighter (1 oz. vs. 2 oz.) than what we had over the last several years. This should be very useful for most gardeners. More light will go through these covers for faster plant growth underneath the cover. It will still provide at least four to six degrees of frost protection. The

lighter weight will allow it to be installed directly over most transplants or emerging seeds without any frame. But you can also build hoop houses (cloches) to support it. The row cover will need to be held down on the edges to keep wind from blowing it off. Row cover width is seven feet and will be cut into 50 or 100 foot lengths (or longer on request). Cost will be \$28/100 linear feet, \$14/50 feet. Row covers are used in vegetable production on farms and home gardens.

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called *Country Living*) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call 503-397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

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