

Carpenter Ant Facts

In some areas of the country, carpenter ants ([wood ants](#)) cause more damage to structures than termites. They are difficult insects to control and can cause extensive damage to wood members in a fairly short period of time. Carpenter ants do not actually eat wood but excavate galleries within it to use as nesting sites. Foraging activity can occur at any time of day but usually peaks at night. When foraging inside houses, carpenter ants are attracted to sweets, meat, grease and fat.

A carpenter ant colony is usually formed by a queen who begins a nest in a piece of old buried wood or in a partially decayed tree or stump. In mature infestations, there may be as many as ten satellite colonies linked to the parent colony by trails. There is a frequent exchange of workers between these satellite colonies and the main nest. Colonies normally do not produce winged reproductive forms until they are at least three to six years old with emergence of swarmers typically occurring from May through July.

The most common way in which homes become infested is through emigration of an existing colony. Houses located near wooded areas or brush covered vacant lots are good candidates for infestation. Carpenter ant colonies are inclined to move if they are disturbed, as often happens during construction. Thus, new homes or those surrounding a new building lot present likely locations for attack.

Inspecting For Carpenter Ants

Some Common Signs of Carpenter Ant Infestations:

- Frass, which is made up of wood shavings, bits of soil, dead ants and parts of insects. This material is often piled up outside of nest openings and found in spider webs and window sills.
- Small windows or slit-like openings that carpenter ants cut into infested wood. These windows are actually "garbage chutes" which are used to dispose of frass or unwanted materials.
- Swarmers are the winged reproductives that take flight in the spring. Look for them trapped in spider webs, on window ledges or in light fixtures.
- Worker carpenter ants are active mostly at night, so you may not see any activity during normal working hours. Even if you do, it does not mean that the nest is nearby. Worker ants can travel up to the length of a football field looking for food.
- Clicking or rustling sounds can sometimes be heard coming from carpenter ant nests. If you identify a potential nest site, try tapping against it with a screwdriver. You may hear a response -- the clicking of alarmed ants.
- Wood damaged by carpenter ants contains galleries that are very clean and smooth.

The first sign of a carpenter ant infestation is usually the sighting of numerous workers throughout the home; occupants often complain of Big Black Ants. However, the presence of workers alone is not conclusive evidence that a colony is established within a structure. Carpenter ant workers tend to roam far and wide looking for food, and some transient workers are sure to enter any home located in a wooded area. Signs of an active infestation include the presence of fibrous sawdust beneath slit-like openings in wood members and faint, rustling noises in walls and woodwork. A positive indication that an active, mature infestation is present is the emergence of large winged ants from walls, ceilings, or crawl spaces.

Carpenter ant galleries in wood have smooth surfaces and can be differentiated from subterranean termite damage by the absence of "mud" in the galleries. Ants normally excavate wood that has been softened by decay or other insects, however, they will tunnel into sound wood when conditions are favorable. Nests and galleries may be located a considerable distance from the point or points of entry. In addition to structural lumber, sites such as hollow-core doors, window headers, wall voids, and foam panels are particularly attractive to carpenter ants.

Carpenter ants often enter homes through openings such as foundation or attic vents, cracks, plumbing holes, entrances for telephone and electric wires, etc. One thing to look for during an inspection are tree branches that may be just above or in contact with the roof. Firewood piles are prime nesting sites and should be treated with an appropriately labeled pesticide

Carpenter Ant Control Methods

Mechanical Modifications

The first step in carpenter ant control should always include mechanical modifications to the structure and environment. The object is to reduce the avenues available for carpenter ants to enter a home or structure, as well as removing possible food and water sources.

- If any tree limbs are in contact with the roof, cut them back. Carpenter ants can easily drop to a structure from tree limbs as high as five feet above the roof.
- Move firewood away from the house. Keep firewood elevated so as not to have direct contact with the soil. This will protect it from other wood destroying organisms (termites, decay, fungus) besides carpenter ants.
- Seal cracks along foundations, siding, windows and doors with caulk and install fine mesh screens over crawl space and attic vents.
- Insects need water in addition to food and eliminating sources of water will make an area less attractive to carpenter ants. If necessary, fix plumbing leaks, reroute air conditioner drains and make sure sprinkler heads are properly adjusted.

Pesticide Applications for Carpenter Ants

There are basically four methods of pesticide application used for controlling active infestations of carpenter ants: [exterior perimeter treatments](#), [interior void treatments](#), [treating the infested wood](#) and [baiting](#).

Perimeter Insecticide Treatments

The most commonly used method for controlling carpenter ants is treating the perimeter of a home with a dust or spray. There are several products available for this type of application, but [Suspend SC](#), [Talstar Concentrate](#) and [Cynoff WP](#) are the best. When used in accordance with their labels they work well. However, these treatments do not keep ants from entering a home from overhead trees and power lines. Also, as a stand alone treatment, they rarely eliminate ants inside voids and walls.