

## What are Red Imported Fire Ants?

Red Imported Fire Ants, with their aggressive nature and painful stings, are beginning to infest California. Already, these tiny but destructive creatures have been found in a number of Southern California and Central Valley counties and are expected to spread even further unless everyone pitches in to help eradicate the pest.

This brochure provides you with information about Red Imported Fire Ants, how to keep your family safe from them, what to do if you are stung, how to report an infestation, and what the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) will do to treat them.

## How did Red Imported Fire Ants come to California?

Red Imported Fire Ants are called “imported” because they are not native to this country. It is believed that they came to the United States from South America aboard cargo ships that docked in Mobile, Ala., in the 1930s. Today, fire ants infest more than 300 million acres in twelve states across the southern United States, as well as Puerto Rico. Most recently, they are infesting California and New Mexico.



## What do Red Imported Fire Ants look like?

Red Imported Fire Ants are very small, ranging from approximately one-sixteenth inch to one-fourth inch, and are reddish-brown in color. They are different from most ants commonly found in

California, but you can't distinguish them from other ants just by looking at them.

## Where do Red Imported Fire Ants live?

Red Imported Fire Ants live underground and can be distinguished by the type of mounds they build on lawns, gardens, parks, fields, cemeteries and inside homes — just about any place they can find moisture. The mounds appear as small piles of fine soil with small holes. These mounds can eventually resemble large gopher



mounds that are often 18 inches across or larger. Red Imported Fire Ants also are attracted to electrical currents and can be found in electrical boxes, such as outdoor sprinkler systems, airport lights and swimming pool pumps.

## Why are Red Imported Fire Ants threatening?

Red Imported Fire Ants have a fierce sting or “bite” that leaves victims with painful, itchy welts. In some cases, stings from Red Imported Fire Ants can even kill people who are allergic to their venom.

Red Imported Fire Ants also are a threat to wildlife and agriculture. They attack and kill pets and wildlife, such as quail, lizards, squirrels and baby deer. They also can attack agricultural workers, compete with beneficial insects and devour important crops, such as citrus, strawberries and corn.

The threat to people and animals is another factor that distinguishes Red Imported Fire Ants from other ants. Other types of ants — both imported and native — pose no threat to people or to wildlife, other than being a nuisance.

## How do Red Imported Fire Ants attack?

Red Imported Fire Ants attack when their nests are disturbed, usually when a person or animal inadvertently steps on their mound. Attracted by movement, the insects swarm onto people or animals before they even realize an attack is under way. Then the ants begin to sting, injecting venom that feels like a poke with a hot needle. Because each ant can sting numerous times, the victim can receive many more stings than there are ants. Each sting will hurt for about an hour and forms a blister-like sore filled with fluid. More than half of those stung by

Red Imported Fire Ants develop reactions where they have been stung that include swelling, itching, redness and pain that lasts for several days. But for some people — maybe two out of 100 — the ant venom can be potentially life-threatening. Symptoms are similar to those suffered by people allergic to bee stings: severe swelling, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, headaches and profuse sweating. People who experience an allergic reaction should immediately seek medical attention.

## How do you treat a Red Imported Fire Ant sting?

If you are stung, these treatments can help alleviate the discomfort and prevent infection:

- Elevate the extremity and apply ice or a cold compress to reduce swelling and relieve pain and itching.
- Wash the affected area with soap and water to prevent secondary infection.
- Keep the blisters clean and avoid scratching to help reduce the chance of infection and scarring.
- Apply a topical ointment containing steroids and/or take an oral antihistamine to relieve the itching.
- Seek medical attention if the swelling progresses, if the area becomes infected, or if you suspect you are experiencing an allergic reaction to the stings.



# ALERT!

Report Infestations

Toll Free at

## 1-888-4FIREANT

(1-888-434-7326)

If you think you have discovered Red Imported Fire Ants, do not disturb the mound or try to kill the ants yourself.

Immediately contact the California Department of Food and Agriculture toll free at 1-888-434-7326, and they will send an expert to check it at no charge to you.

For more information visit the Web site  
[www.fireant.ca.gov](http://www.fireant.ca.gov)



California Department of Food and Agriculture

# FAST FACTS

## Be on the lookout

Protect your family and yourself by being on the lookout for Red Imported Fire Ants. These simple tips will help keep you safe and help rid California of this unwanted pest.

## Safety first

- Reduce your risk of being stung by dressing properly when walking, gardening or digging outdoors.
- Wear gloves and closed-toe shoes with socks.
- Before you allow children to play outside, survey the area for ant mounds.
- Children should wear protective clothing while playing in the dirt.

## If you are stung

- If the swelling progresses, if the area becomes infected, or if you suspect you could be experiencing an allergic reaction to the stings, you should seek medical attention immediately. An allergic reaction could include severe swelling, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, headaches and profuse sweating.
- Elevate the extremity and apply ice or a cold compress to reduce swelling and relieve pain and itching.
- Wash the affected area with soap and water to prevent secondary infection.
- Keep the blisters clean and avoid scratching to help reduce the chance of infection and scarring.
- Apply a topical ointment containing steroids and/or take an oral antihistamine to relieve the itching.

## How can you protect your family and yourself from Red Imported Fire Ants?

Reduce your risk of being stung by dressing properly when walking, gardening or digging outdoors. Among the precautions you should take:

- Wear gloves and closed-toe shoes with socks.
- Before you allow children to play outside, survey the area for ant mounds.
- Children should wear protective clothing while playing outdoors.

## What should you do if you think you've found Red Imported Fire Ants?

- Do not disturb the suspected mound or nest and don't try to kill the ants or destroy the nest yourself!
- Call the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Fire Ant Hotline toll free at 1-888-4FIREANT. You will be asked questions to help determine if you have discovered a Red Imported Fire Ant infestation, and an expert will be sent at no charge to check it.

## How are Red Imported Fire Ant infestations treated?

Treatment experts use an environmentally safe two-step process to eradicate Red Imported Fire Ants.

- First, experts will spread bait around the mounds that consists of an insect growth regulator mixed with ground-up corn cobs coated with soybean oil. The ants will carry the bait back to their nests where the chemical will sterilize the queen and keep the immature insects from becoming adults.
- Next, they spread a similar bait containing a slow-acting pesticide. Again, the ants will carry it back to their mounds, where the pesticide will gradually poison and eradicate the insects over several weeks.

Both the pesticide and the growth regulator are used in extremely small doses—less than one-tenth of an ounce per acre—and both quickly lose their potency when exposed to the air and water. Thus, they pose almost no threat to animals or humans.

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# RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS

