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Ants in Food Plants

Patricia Hottel, Technical Director, McCloud Services

Ants are the most common cause of pest related complaints in the United States and one of the first pests on the scene in the spring. They are a diverse group with a variety of preferred habitats. Ants are social insects which may nest in soil, wood or voids. Food plants may experience problems with ants being shipped in on product or inside wooden pallets. They may also come inside from the surrounding exterior as they search for food or new nest sites.

The type of ant pest a site will experience will vary based on geographical location and available resources. There are hundreds of different species of ants in the United States. Thankfully, only a few are pests of structures. One species, the Argentine ant will be more common in the southeastern and southwestern states. This ant is not native to the United States but has been able to become prevalent pest species in the area they inhabit. A native species, the odorous house ant can be found in most parts of the United States. A more northern species is the pavement ant. It can be recognized by the small soil craters it creates around paved areas in the soil.

The Argentine ant will be more common in the southeastern and southwestern states

Regardless of the species, there are some things that all food plants can do to help minimize issues with these common pests:

- Inspect all incoming shipments to make sure that ants are not brought into the facility inside shipping containers or wooden pallets. Carpenter ants will create galleries in wooden pallets or may harbor in voids of product containers. A variety of ants can be brought in on cardboard boxes or products where they have been foraging for food. Check the product and the pallet for ants. All ants can contaminate food or food packaging as a result of their nesting or foraging habits. Nest disturbances can cause a colony to move the entire nest and it could be into a semi-trailer of filled food products. International shipments can result in the introduction of new invasive species which can sometimes create even more challenges in getting ant issues resolved.

- Keep food spills to a minimum both outside and inside the facility. Ants are constantly foraging for food. Keep attractants such as food spills to a minimum. Areas like sugar unloading can be particularly attractive to ants especially if the area is not well maintained.

The Pavement ant will be more common in the northern states

The Odorous House ant can be found in most parts of the United States

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- Keep expansion joints well sealed. Ants like the pavement ant can come up through cracks in floors and expansion joints.
- Keep doors and other entry points sealed. Ants tend to utilize natural lines like wires and pipes. They can easily follow these lines inside, for example, the pipe/wall junctures are not properly sealed.
- Avoid the use of wood mulch around the exterior of the structure. Some ants like the odorous house ant will build shallow nests under mulch, rocks and leaf litter.
- Pick your landscaping plants wisely especially those plants which are close to the building. Many ant species feed on the honey dew or secretions of aphids or other insects which are plant pests. Minimizing these honey dew producing insects can minimize your ant populations.

Report any observed ant activity to your pest management professional. Insecticide baits in conjunction with non-repellent insecticide sprays are the frequently used chemical control methods for ant control. Supplement chemical control with good sanitation and exclusion.

About the Author

Patricia Hottel is technical director at McCloud Services and has over 35 years of pest management industry experience. Hottel is a board certified entomologist and a member of the National Pest Management Association's Commercial and Fumigation Committees. She is also a former member of the board of directors of the National Pest Management Association (NPMA) and the Illinois Pest Control Association (IPCA). She has served on the board of directors for the professional pest management fraternity, Pi Chi Omega, is a past chair and current member of the Copesan Technical Committee, is a past chair of NPMA's exam review board, and the NPMA Technical Committee. Hottel holds a bachelor's degree in entomology from the University of Georgia and a master's degree in instructional technology from the University of Central Missouri.

About McCloud Services

Founded in 1904, McCloud Services, based in South Elgin, Ill., is the leader in food protection services throughout the chain of custody – from grain elevator to grocery store. McCloud Services is known for its integrated approach to pest management, specifically designed for the food supply chain of custody. Serving the largest food-related brands in the U.S. McCloud Services has locations in 11 states with nine service centers.

McCloud Services is a founding member and shareholder in Copesan, an alliance of premier pest management companies with locations throughout North America. Headquartered in South Elgin, Illinois, McCloud Services has locations in Illinois as well as throughout Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio and Wisconsin.

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