Managing Fire Ants in Butterfly Gardens

Molly Keck
Extension Program Specialist II-Integrated Pest Management
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

Paul R. Nester
Extension Program Specialist I-Integrated Pest Management
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

If you are cultivating butterfly gardens in Texas, the red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), can be a serious problem. Fire ant stings can cause allergic reactions that lead to serious health problems in sensitive people (see [Medical Problems and Treatment Considerations for the Red Imported Fire Ant](#)). Fire ants prey on caterpillars, the developing stage of butterflies (see [What do fire ants eat?](#)), and must be eliminated where you plant butterfly gardens to raise butterflies (see [Butterfly Gardening in Texas](#) and [Landscape IPM, Butterfly Gardening](#)).

Nectar-producing flowers planted to attract adult butterflies are mostly ornamental bedding plants or shrubs. Some host plants of caterpillars occur on vegetable plants. For instance, the black swallowtail caterpillar or parsleyworm feeds on dill, fennel, parsley, and related wild host plants. Pesticides must be approved for the site or crop on which they are used, compatible with butterfly gardening, and applied according to product label directions and applicable regulations (see [Fire Ants and the Texas IPM in Schools Program](#)).

**Management Options**

There are few approved methods for controlling fire ants in vegetable gardens (see [Managing Fire Ants in Vegetable Gardens](#)). They include everything from home remedies such as using very hot or boiling water drenches (see [Are there any home remedies that will kill fire ants?](#)), using bait insecticides, organic methods (see [Natural, Organic and Alternative Methods for Imported Fire Ant Management](#)), and, as a last resort, conventional chemical treatments (see [Managing Fire Ants in Urban Areas](#)). If the butterfly garden is not a vegetable garden, you will find that more options are available.

**Nonchemical methods.** One nonchemical fire ant management method uses very hot water. Pouring 2 to 3 gallons of very hot water on a newly constructed fire ant mound will kill the mound about 60 percent of the time. However, take care when using this method not to “cook” valuable garden plants in the process! When applying the hot water, use extreme caution so that the hot water or steam does not burn you.
There are organic options for fire ant management (see *Natural, Organic, and Alternative Methods for Imported Fire Ant Management*); however, take special care on butterfly garden plants because most of these products are in the liquid form and can affect caterpillars and butterflies. Avoid drift onto the plant by drenching the soil on nonwindy days. Spinosad, a product derived from a naturally occurring bacterium, is an organic product recognized by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) and the National Organic Standards Board as being a natural substance. Products containing plant-derived substances such as the pyrethrins or d-limonene (citrus oil extract) are also approved as fire ants mound treatments.

**Acknowledgments**

Nathan Riggs wrote the original fact sheet, initially released as Fire Ant Plan Fact Sheet #016 in 1998 and revised in 2005 and 2010. The 2012 revision was reviewed by Bart M. Drees and Molly Keck.

**References**

- *Medical Problems and Treatment Considerations for the Red Imported Fire Ant*
  u.tamu.edu/ento-005
- *What do fire ants eat?*
  www.extension.org/pages/60922/what-do-fire-ants-eat
- *Butterfly Gardening in Texas*
  www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/L-5313.htm
- *Landscape IPM, Butterfly Gardening*
  landscapeipm.tamu.edu/what-is-ipm/ipm-concepts/pest-identification/good-bug-bad-bug/beneficials/butterfly-gardening
- *Fire Ants and the Texas IPM in Schools Program*
  u.tamu.edu/ento-017
For more information regarding fire ant management, see Extension publications Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas, Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control, or Fire Ant Control: The Two-Step Method and Other Approaches posted on http://AgriLifeBookstore.org.

The information given herein is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is implied.