

# Managing Fire Ants in Vegetable Gardens

## Molly Keck

Extension Program Specialist II—Integrated Pest Management  
 Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

The red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), can be a serious problem for anyone planting and caring for a garden in infested parts of Texas and the South. Fire ants are attracted to the abundant moisture, rich organic soil, and the wide variety of foods available to them in gardens.

Fire ants are social insects. Their colonies are usually found outdoors, although some have been found in homes and in other structures. Outdoors, their mounds can be up to 18 inches tall and several feet in diameter. Each colony may contain one or more queen ants and more than 200,000 worker ants. Each queen ant lays as many as 800 eggs per day.

Worker ants forage for food and love to eat greasy or oily materials (see [Fire Ant Biology](#)). In gardens, this includes oil-containing seeds, seed pods, and insects (pests and beneficial insects).

### Options for Controlling Fire Ants In Vegetable Gardens

Type/Active Ingredient	Trade Names	Comments
<b>Bait products<sup>1</sup>:</b>		
hydramethylnon	Amdro Fire Ant Bait/Amdro Fire Strike/Amdro Yard Treatment	Not approved for use in vegetable gardens, but can be applied around and outside the borders of the garden so the worker ants inside and outside of the garden can gather the bait and take it back to their colonies.
abamectin	Clinch/Ascend/Varsity Award II, Enforcer Fire Ant Bait	
fenoxycarb	Award	
pyriproxyfen	Distance/Esteem	
s-methoprene + hydromethlynon	Extinguish Plus/Amdro Fire Strike Fire Ant Bait for Yard Treatment	
indoxacarb	Spectracide Fire Ant Killer Plus Preventer Bait Once & Done	
metaflumazone	Siesta	
s-methoprene	Extinguish Professional Fire Ant Bait	Approved for cropland (including vegetable gardens). Requires 6 to 8 weeks for effects to begin.
pyriproxifen	Esteem Ant Bait	
spinosad	FertiLome Come and Get It	Approved for vegetable gardens. <sup>*</sup> OMRI certified, approved for organic vegetable gardens.



<b>“Organic” methods<sup>2</sup>:</b>		
pyrethrins + diatomaceous earth	Organic Solutions Multipurpose Fire Ant Killer/Diatect Results Fire Ant Killer	Effective mound drench at 4 tablespoons per gallon of water. Provides quick kill with short-term residues.
diatomaceous earth (DE)	N/A	Horticultural-type DE applied to mounds as a dust or water suspension may move ant colonies, but probably not eliminate them.
D-limonene	Orange Avenger*	*OMRI certified (see <a href="http://www.omri.org/manufacturers/94301/orange-avenger-llc">http://www.omri.org/manufacturers/94301/orange-avenger-llc</a> , approved for organic vegetable gardens.
spinosad	Greenlight Lawn and Garden Spray/Fertilome products, Monterey Garden Insect Spray, several Bonide products	Approved for vegetable gardens.
<b>Pyrethroid insecticides:</b> bifenthrin	Ortho Bug B Gone Max/Ortho Max Lawn and Garden Insect Killer for Lawns/Over N Out/Bayer Lawn and Garden	Some of these products are approved against soil insects in the garden, including fire ants, and may suppress foraging by ants. Other products can be used only in the lawn or on label-listed vegetables. Check the label for approved uses.
β-cyfluthrin		
<b>Carbamate insecticide:</b> carbaryl	Sevin, various products	Read product label to determine if the product is approved for fire ants in the vegetable garden. Formulated as liquids, dusts, or granules.
<b>Organophosphates:</b> acephate	Various, EX: Ortho Orthene Fire Ant Killer/Surrender Fire Ant Killer	Formulated as liquids, dusts, or granules. Read the label carefully to determine if the product is labeled for application in a vegetable garden. If not, they can be applied directly to mounds outside the garden.
<b>Non-Chemical Methods<sup>3</sup>:</b>		
Very-hot-to-boiling water	N/A	1 to 2 gallons of very hot to boiling water will kill <i>fresh</i> fire ant colonies in mounds 60 percent of the time. Be careful not to cook the plants.

<sup>1</sup>See *Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control*

<sup>2</sup>See *Natural, Organic, and Alternative Methods for Imported Fire Ant Management*

<sup>3</sup>See *Are there any home remedies that will kill fire ants?*

They have been reported to feed on okra pods and tunnel into potato tubers, particularly during periods of dry weather (see [What do fire ants eat?](#)). The following chart outlines options and strategies available to combat fire ants in vegetable gardens.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This fact sheet was originally written by Nathan Riggs, Extension Agent—IPM as Fire Ant Plan Fact Sheet #004 in 1999 and revised in 2002. This current revision was reviewed by Bastiaan M. Drees, Professor and Extension Entomologist, and Paul Nester, Extension Program Specialist, Harris Co.

## REFERENCES

### *Fire Ant Biology*

[www.extension.org/pages/60963/fire-ant-biology](http://www.extension.org/pages/60963/fire-ant-biology)

### *What do fire ants eat?*

[www.extension.org/pages/60922/what-do-fire-ants-eat](http://www.extension.org/pages/60922/what-do-fire-ants-eat)

### *Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control*

[www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/e-628.htm](http://www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/e-628.htm)

### *Natural, Organic, and Alternative Methods for Imported Fire Ant Management*

[u.tamu.edu/ento-009](http://u.tamu.edu/ento-009)

*Are there any home remedies that will kill fire ants?*

[www.extension.org/pages/34814/are-there-any-home-remedies-that-will-kill-fire-ants](http://www.extension.org/pages/34814/are-there-any-home-remedies-that-will-kill-fire-ants)

*Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas*

[www.extension.org/pages/11004/managing-imported-fire-ants-in-urban-areas-printable-version](http://www.extension.org/pages/11004/managing-imported-fire-ants-in-urban-areas-printable-version)

*Fire Ant Control: The Two-Step Method and Other Approaches*

[www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/ento-034.htm](http://www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/ento-034.htm)

**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.

**Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service**

*AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu*

More Extension publications can be found at *AgriLifeBookstore.org*

Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or veteran status.

---

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating.