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Even Though We Do Not See Them.....Fire Ants Are Still Here!

Even though we will not step into many fire ant mounds this season, the fire ant colonies are still active underground. Due to the drought, the fire ants are probably not going to build many new mounds in the area. However these insects are subterranean, so they are still living underground. This means we still need to treat this spring, in order to suppress the existing fire ant population.

Before treating for fire ants, one will need to survey the area to determine the number of mounds on their land. If more than 5 mounds are present in a quarter acre plot, the land is considered infested and should be treated using the Texas Two Step Method. Next the homeowner should test for foraging activity. In order to test for foraging activity, a potato chip or hot dog should be placed next to the mound. If fire ants find the chip or hot dog within thirty minutes, the worker ants are actively foraging and will pick up the fire ant bait. Typically, fire ants will forage when soil temperatures are between 70 and 90° F.

The Texas Two Step is the recommended program for fire ant control, if more than 5 mounds are present in a quarter acre plot. The **first step** of the Texas Two Step method is to **broadcast fire ant bait** over the entire area. A fire ant bait is a product containing both a food source and an insecticide. This bait is collected by worker ants and carried back to the colony to be shared with the queen and other ants. The delivery process of baits into the colony is so effective, that the amount of insecticides applied in an area is significantly reduced. However one should only use fresh bait products, since fire ants will not pick up the bait if it smells rancid. The **second step** of the Texas Two Step Program is to **treat the individual mounds**. The mound treatment is the fastest way to get rid of the fire ant mounds, but it is more labor intensive and more costly to apply when compared to the broadcast baits. Therefore, step two should be limited to those mounds found around the foundation and in high traffic areas.

Fipronil granule contact insecticides, such as Over 'N Out™ and TopChoice™ can also be used as a one step method for fire ant control. These products should be applied over the entire infested area, and need to be watered in for control. These products usually provide 9 to 12 months control.

Before applying any type of pesticide, always be sure to read and follow the pesticide label. Also never use harmful toxins, such as gasoline to control fire ants. These products are illegal and dangerous. Also never leave pesticides on streets or walkways after application, in order to avoid unnecessary entrance into the water supply.

For more information about fire ants, please visit the fire ant webpage at www.fireant.tamu.edu



Red imported fire ant worker. Photo by Bart Drees, Texas A&M University.

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