

Fire Ants

Ants are social insects in the same order as wasps and bees. They generally build large colonies with distinct caste systems. The founding queen is initially joined by a male, but all of the workers in the nest are sterile females. Most of the pest ant species in California are introduced from elsewhere. Colonies can have thousands of individuals, most of which are workers. Most of our pest species nest in the ground and are generally scavengers feeding on living or dead insects, nectar, honeydew or food available in the kitchen.

Native Fire Ant. The native fire ant, *Solenopsis xyloni*, is found throughout the southern states and in southern California. Workers are brownish red, with a brown to black abdomen, and range in size from $\frac{1}{10}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ in. in length. The colonies are large, and workers come in several forms. They are vicious stingers. Colonies are subterranean and have irregular mounds of loose soil surrounding the entrance.

These ants are omnivorous, and in addition to feeding on live and dead insects, they are particularly attracted to sugar, meat, grease and other fatty foods. They also tend aphids, mealy bugs and scale insects for the honeydew these insects produce.

Native fire ants are not often found in homes, and are

pests in California, although they are known to damage young citrus and pecan trees in orchards by girdling the young trees. They are also known to severely damage vegetable seedlings on occasion. However, they are commonly confused with the imported fire ant, a major introduced pest.

Imported Fire Ant. The imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta*, was apparently introduced in ship cargo from South America before the 1920's. Since then it has spread throughout the southern states, and is now found along coastal southern California. This is a major quarantine pest for California.

These are red ants with a vicious sting. They are quick to attack humans, livestock and pets. Mature colonies can contain more than 100,000 individuals, in large, hard crusted mounds. These nests are generally established in open areas including schoolyards, agricultural land, vacant lots, and the like. They can overwhelm an area with nest densities of 25-40 mounds per acre. They are also omnivorous, but are active predators and feed on insects and other small animals, completely denuding the surroundings of animal life, particularly ground-nesting birds and lizards.



Native fire ant, *Solenopsis xyloni*. Photo from antweb.org.



Imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta*. Photo from antweb.org.