AG NOTES

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FIRE ANTS

We've had imported fire ants for a good while now. They are adapted to our area and seem to thrive. The mounds are appearing quickly now. These things are busy raising brood and enlarging the mounds. My granddaughter spots them for us when we are riding in the farm ATV.

When they first showed up it was scary. We heard of all kinds of dangerous things, and they can do damage to humans and animals alike, but they are manageable. There is no way we can eliminate them, but we can work to manage them in high-risk areas.

We have a great publication. It is The Two-Step Method: Managing Fire Ants Around Homes and In Neighborhoods (SP 419). It's adapted for Tennessee from information at Texas A&M University by Karen M. Vail, Associate Professor, Patrick Parkman, IPM Coordinator, Tahir Rashid, Post-doctoral Research Associate; and Roberto Pereira, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Entomology and Plant Pathology, all University of Tennessee specialists. I'll share some of it here.

Recent research from The University of Tennessee indicates the hybrid form found in East and parts of Middle Tennessee is more cold-tolerant than either parent species (the red or black imported fire ant). Therefore, we must learn how to manage these pesky ants. Once fire ants are established in an area, we'll need to apply the two-step method twice a year.

The first step is to broadcast a fire ant bait over the entire yard. Baits are a product containing a food plus a moderately slow-to slow-acting insecticide. When collected by worker ants, bait particles are carried to the colony and shared with the queen and other ants.

Less pesticide is needed with baits, because this kind of delivery is so efficient. We use the worker ants to share the poison with the rest of the colony. Baits work best when scattered lightly over the entire yard. This way, workers from small, undetected colonies will also collect the bait, reducing the need to individually treat these colonies. Hand-held seed spreaders are ideal for applying fire ant baits. Set the spreader on the smallest opening and make one pass over the area to be treated. This should apply the recommended rate (1 to 1½ pounds per acre for most products). Push-type fertilizer spreaders put out bait too quickly, leading to an overapplication of pesticide and greater cost.

Be patient. Baits work slowly. Products containing active ingredients such as indoxacarb, abamectin, hydramethylnon or spinosad control ants within two to four weeks, or sooner. Insect growth regulator baits or IGRs (fenoxycarb, methoprene and pyriproxyfen) usually require two to six months. The advantage of growth regulators is that they prevent reinvasion by new queens and thereby need to be reapplied less often when treating areas larger than an acre.

Apply baits at the right time. Baits are effective only when fire ants are actively searching for food. Ants remove baits from the soil surface within a few hours if baits are applied during peak foraging times. Fire ants forage actively when the soil surface temperature is between 70 and 90 degrees F, late May to September, in most of Tennessee.

Seven to 10 days after broadcasting a bait, the second step is completed by treating colonies needing immediate attention. A mound treatment destroys one colony at a time and is the fastest way to get rid of individual colonies. It's not necessary to treat all fire ant colonies with mound treatments after applying a bait. Limit Step Two treatments to mounds located next to house foundations, in high-traffic areas or other trouble spots.

There is a lot of other information in this handy publication. There is a chart that lists products that can be used to help control these critters. I can share the link, so send me an email and I'll get it right back to you. For those who don't have internet, I'll be glad to share a copy.

EMAIL NEWSLETTER

I send out an email newsletter each week with ag-related information. It includes market reports, production information, program announcements, etc., and other 'stuff' I think is timely and helpful to someone. I rely on sending links and attachments to keep file size manageable.

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