

Ants

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Are you hosting ants these days? Put down the borax and raise your hand; you're one in a million pretty antsy Canadians. PCO Orkin estimates that 60,000 Canadian houses are exterminator-treated every spring. For each of these, perhaps another twenty beleaguered homeowners are trying to take on their ants by themselves.

Add to these figures this year perhaps most of Montreal. Trees felled by the ice storm of 1998 and left to rot are now, after seven years, yielding very mature colonies of ants—and they're coming indoors. According to local exterminators, the Montreal colonies number up to 20,000 ants each, and by all reports have overrun the city.

Carpenter ants (*Camponotus*) are the most destructive common insect we have in Canada, trumping even termites. New homes, older homes, even homes-in-progress all have ants chewing through beams and studs.

Exterminators call house ants their toughest adversary. When you see more than 10 indoors at a time, the pros say it's time to call. They may be right—if they find ants tough, you'll find them frightful.

Hibernating in colonies each winter in a state called diapause, they slumber in old, wet or rotting wood, wake in spring, eat their way through summer (and your home, garden and trees), and sleep again come fall. A single colony can live this way for twenty years.

Indoor ant-sightings between January and April may well mean a nest has moved in with you. It will be a satellite of a main nest out-of-doors, probably in woodland nearby—in an old stump, a firewood pile or a dying tree—but it will bug you all the same.

There are ordeals and ordeals, Saul Bellow said. The ordeal of ants can go unappreciated—until you step through your attic floor, or have a wall fall on you. An ant treehouse might even fall on you, as did a huge branch of a rotting 150-year-old oak in Toronto one recent morning, demolishing three backyards and narrowly missing two toddlers playing on a deck.

Ants are everywhere. Tucked away in what you think are the comforts of your home, you might swallow one in the middle of the night, as I did last month.

Ants forage after dark, and this year our ants, the worst ever, took over our bed. My husband served in Vietnam, and said he'd slept with worse.

He hadn't.

An average mature colony, one that's a few years old, numbers upwards of 3,000 ants. We'd had our ants before. This year, again, they moved into the nine-foot sill of our bedroom window overlooking Nova Scotia's south shore. That's a lot of sill, a lot of ants and a lot of sawdust on the floor below.

Ants don't eat wood; they "only" invade it, particularly where it's wet - under siding and roofing panels, along roof line gutters and braces, under bathroom floors, in ceiling insulation. But they also nest in walls, ceilings, furniture, floors, doors...and window sills. The first ant nest we discovered in our house had snuggled into the fibreglass insulation around the water heater.

Nestled on your forested lot, your house, like ours, exudes the temperature and humidity ants love, and can host several satellite nests. These can live long and prosper as much as 200 meters from HQ outside. Queens live outside, thank heavens; inside, you'll find only the workers (females, of course) and the older pupae, looking just like Rice Krispies.

The galleries that ants tunnel in wood are frequently extensive, and expensive to repair. On the West Coast, where wood in spring can be wet indeed, carpenter ants once entered a house under renovation and excavated all the studs in a 20-foot wall. One of the eight-foot two-by-fours that remained weighed less than two pounds; the rest was sawdust.

You'll probably know you have ants in residence long before you see the classic signs: sawdust and frass (bug waste) falling from wall crevices and electrical boxes; "Rice Krispies" and insect parts piled in corners (ants eat their dead, and feed it to the kids).

Rustling in the walls is also a sign, but in my house last month we waited for one sound only: the music of ants popping. We were on our sixth home remedy. We'd tried diatomaceous earth, borax in powders and drips, and a shaker full of carbaryl. That's a dangerous insecticide, but so what?

Then we tried vacuuming, and just plain stomping. If you use borax, you shouldn't stomp. Let poisoned ants return to their nest, to infect it too - that's the theory, anyway. We waited weeks without stomping, but still the ants came marching.

Our sixth try was a 50:50 mix of baking soda and icing sugar. The icing sugar was bait. The baking soda, once ingested, was supposed to build up as carbonate and explode the ant.

That didn't happen either. When you have ants like ours, waiting on home remedies only allows them more time to get into bed with you.

And so we called the exterminator. Before he could get here, though, the weather changed. We had a month of merciless, frigid gales out East, with more than three times the normal rainfall. In all of May there were two days of sun, and the ants disappeared from our picture window. They drowned, perhaps; froze, more likely.

Or maybe they'd just had enough of Nova Scotia weather, like the rest of us.

Ants underfoot? What you can do

Clean up. Ants want food, not your house. Don't make it easy for them. Empty pet dishes, sweep up crumbs.

Repair your house. Fix roofs and chimneys, clear gutters, vent crawl spaces, axe rotten decks and landscaping ties.

Dry out. Fix leaky plumbing; clear soil from sills, dehumidify the basement.

Get out of the forest. Dispatch old firewood, decrepit trees, rotting logs, stumps, fences. Clear vegetation from your foundation.

Bar the way. Apply Teflon barriers to your foundation below the siding, at least a foot off the ground.

Pitch the poisons. Tin traps don't work on carpenter ants. Other forms of borax don't work well enough either - only 10% of ants are ever out of their nest at one time, and poisonous. Have an exterminator in your sights.