

Argentine Ant



Let's stop the invasion!



The **Argentine ant**, *Linepithema humile* is one of the world's most invasive and problematic ant species. It is native to Argentina and Brazil, but has now been discovered in New Zealand – in urban areas, horticultural regions, near ports and on an important conservation island!

What are they?

Argentine ants are very aggressive insects. Although they are not poisonous, they do bite people. They are capable of completely eliminating other types of ant colonies, and also destroy and eat other insect species and earthworms. They particularly like sweet food, and tend populations of aphids and scale insects on plants, using them as a source of honeydew while protecting them from their natural predators. Unlike other ant species, Argentine ant colonies co-operate with each other, and can combine over winter into super-colonies. This makes them more competitive and aggressive towards other insect populations through their sheer numbers.

What do they look like?

Because they are so small, the best way to tell Argentine ants from other ants is by their colour and their trails. The wingless worker ant (most commonly seen), is light to dark brown, and 2-3mm long (most other common household ants in New Zealand are black). Argentine ants are highly active in searching for food, and their trails are often five or more ants wide and travel up trees or buildings. Other species of ants don't tend to climb trees, and would not have such strong trails unless they were moving a nest (in which case you would see ants carrying their eggs). If you squash an Argentine ant there is no strong formic acid smell as there is with some ants.

Where have they been found?

Argentine ants were first found in Auckland in 1990, at the Mt Smart site of the 1990 Commonwealth Games. More recently, they have been found in Northland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Wellington and Christchurch. They have also been discovered on Tiritiri Matangi, a precious conservation island in the Hauraki Gulf. Although they breed prolifically, they do not swarm (fly off to establish new nests). This means that they do not spread rapidly, but when a site is infested it will have a very high number of ants and colonies. Their natural rate of invasion is a few hundred metres per year, however their main way of spreading to new areas is through transported nests. This often occurs when a potted plant is moved with a nest in its soil, or by nests established on vehicles.

Why are they a threat to New Zealand?

- Left unchecked, Argentine ants will become a major household and garden pest. Their huge numbers (up to six nests per square metre) mean a huge appetite, and they will utilise just about any food source they can find. They are even known to make their way into microwaves, refrigerators and screw-top jars. In California, Argentine ants are now considered to be one of the worse household pests.
- Argentine ants threaten native invertebrates wherever they invade. The ants are very aggressive and kill or drive away other insects. In South Africa and the USA, Argentine ants threaten endangered species that rely on native ants for food, pollination or seed dispersal. However, no such interactions are known in New Zealand.

- Argentine ants climb trees and can kill baby birds in the nest. The ants are also very active foragers, and compete strongly with other species that feed on honeydew or nectar, including insects and birds.
- Argentine ants 'farm' populations of aphids, scale insects and other pests that produce honeydew. The ants protect the insects from predators, and will even move them to new plants or to new parts of the plant. This is particularly serious for organic growers and those using integrated pest management, who rely on predators to control these pests. Argentine ants have also been reported to feed directly on fruit crops, and their sheer numbers can damage flowers and reduce fruit set. They are one of the worst pest of citrus in Australia, and a serious pest of viticulture, avocado and tomato crops.
- Argentine ants are not found in some Asian countries. If they become established in New Zealand's horticultural areas and near our export ports, they may impact on our trade with those countries.

Tips for controlling Argentine ants

- Remove or securely store food that is favoured by ants. Clean surfaces with lemon juice, soapy water or diluted eucalyptus or tea tree oil.
- Trim trees near your home to reduce ant access to your roof or window areas. Use two-sided tape or chalk dust around tree trunks to discourage ants (especially where birds are nesting).
- Reduce moisture sources (e.g. leaking taps, irrigation), as Argentine ants prefer moist conditions. Keep your roof gap and sub-floor dry and well-ventilated to discourage Argentine ants from nesting there.
- Where ant trails enter your house, spray with a permethrin spray such as "Ant Ban" on the surface. Use the spray where it will not be affected by the weather, so the permethrin will remain on the surface and repel ants. Stop obvious entry points.
- In winter you may be able to follow the ant trails back to the super-colony. If you discover this colony, you may be able to kill it with boiling water. However be warned that the ants may swarm and bite if they get the chance.
- DO NOT try and spray generally for ants, as this may encourage new nests to "bud off" from the main colony and could worsen the situation.



Priorities for action

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry should respond to this potentially serious threat by declaring the Argentine ant an Unwanted Organism under the Biosecurity Act and developing a National Pest Management Strategy.
- Nationwide monitoring to detect areas where the ants are present, and eradication of isolated infestations such as those in Wellington, Christchurch and Tiritiri Matangi Island.
- Baiting operations and ongoing monitoring at the Auckland 'epicentres' (e.g. plant nurseries in heavily infested areas) to prevent further dispersal to other regions.
- Baiting operations at other Auckland problem sites (e.g. landfills, reserves) and public education on what to do and who to contact about the ants.
- In future, better inspection of imports (e.g. containers, vehicles, produce) and prompt responses to eradicate new pests when they are first discovered in New Zealand.

Keeping track of Argentine ants

In order to control new populations of Argentine ants, early detection is essential. If you think you have Argentine ants, send a sample to Landcare Research at the address below. Include your name and address and details of where you found the ants, and they will let you know if it is indeed Argentine ant.

Argentine Ant Survey
Landcare Research
Private Bag 6, Nelson.



Manaaki Whenua
Landcare Research

Time to call in the experts?

For professional pest control from a company that is SERIOUS about Argentine ants, contact Flybusters,



Freephone: 0800 83 70 70,
Phone: 09-486 44 11,
Fax: 09-489 70 91,
www.flybusters.co.nz

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ULTIMATE RESPONSE. LOCAL EXPERTS.

you can help!

Write to the Minister of Biosecurity and your local MP outlining your concerns about the impacts of the Argentine ant on New Zealand's environment, native species, horticulture and trade. Join Forest and Bird or make a donation. Your contribution will help us raise awareness and campaign for action.

This factsheet was produced by Forest and Bird, with assistance from: Lottery Environment and Heritage Fund, The Department of Conservation, Landcare Research, Environment B.O.P., Flybusters Insect Control Ltd.

For more information contact Forest and Bird,
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