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SHARING
SECRETS

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“Is there any hope for controlling Argentine ants?”

This is our inaugural question for our Sharing Secrets column. In a world where getting your hands dirty is the essence of what we do, there's still no denying we live and work in an information society - which is especially good news for gardeners! Because the real goldmine of information is to be found right within our midst. Here's a sample of the answers we received:

In the house, spray either Windex or detergent and water. - *Anon.*

Use “Termidor” which is an insecticide only sold to termite control people. It is almost non-toxic to people - even less so than Malathion. Ants can be sprayed (most will not die at once) and they carry it back to the nest where it wipes out the entire colony! Since this insecticide is not available to the general public - not even those with an applicator's license - it has to be obtained through a licensed termite control man. However you manage to get it, it is worth the trouble as it will completely eradicate Argentine ants! - *LMW*

Flood out their colonies and they move. However, a colony can cover more than a city block. I use detergent and wet towels dipped in bleach to block entry! Also, get rid of foods they like such as meat and sweets. - *JJ*

I use Grant's ant stakes around citrus tree and in pots. I have to replace frequently. Maybe not “control” but it helps. Mint is said to repel ants so perhaps a “tea” spray? Have not tried this. - *Anon.*

My favorite recipe: Grind up one potato chip (or the crumbs left in the bag); add a few pinches of sugar; add a pinch of boric acid (obtain at pharmacy); grind all together in a mortar and pestle, like you use to grind spices. Distribute resulting crumbs along ant trails. They will take it back to the nest and do away with the colony (may take a week or two). Eventually the next will be repopulated by immigrants from your neighbor's yard. Just repeat. Sorry about having to eat potato chips, you don't have to. Start with cookie crumbs instead but make sure they are greasy enough to tempt the ants. (Boric acid in these teensy quantities isn't going to hurt your pets.) - *PC*

As a beginner-gardener I have picked up tidbits of how to deal with bad bugs, but it became obvious very quickly that ants were the key to keeping the bad bugs at bay. Not until I tried the following recipe did I make any headway in the control (control? well certainly an obvious impact) of the ants in my yard. But it only seemed to work with one kind of ant, those that want sugar. So I have started experimenting with mixing the boric acid with bacon grease for those ants that seem to prefer fat to sugar. I'll keep you posted on my results. Recipe: Into 2 cups of boiling water, add 2 level teaspoons of powdered boric acid. Mix until powder dissolves. Add 2 cups of sugar and mix until it has dissolved completely. Place a few drops of the cooled mixture in their path and the ants will line around it to feed. - *WG*

Here is a response we received after deadline, but well worth including:

In response to your question about controlling Argentine Ants, I don't have any solutions, but I do have some info on why they're so hard to control:

Unlike honeybees, which have one queen per colony (and therefore only one reproductive member), Argentine Ants are multicolonial, with many queens forming supercolonies that can consist of millions of individuals. If the individuals are all closely related - sisters, half-sisters, cousins, etc. - they will cooperate in food gathering, raising young and defending their territory against other ants. In their natural habitat, there is enough genetic diversity that supercolonies eventually run into unrelated colonies that fight back and keep their numbers in check.

A broadly-held theory states that all the Argentine Ants in North America apparently are descended from one colony (or a few colonies) brought in with coffee shipments in the late 1800's. So all North American Argentine Ants are related closely enough to consider themselves "family." This theory proposes that all the Argentine Ants in California, from Ukiah to San Diego, are part of one huge supercolony. Other researchers have since disputed this claim, but everyone agrees that California ants are more likely to cooperate than fight. This behavior makes them extremely hard to eradicate.

For more information on Argentine Ants, check out Wayne's World:

<http://waynesword.palomar.edu/ww0403.htm>

or this article on the California super-colony theory:

http://www-biology.ucsd.edu/news/article_051500.html

For an article opposing the California super-colony theory, read:

<http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2004/april7/antstudies-47.html>

I use Grant's Ant Granules or Ant Stakes to try to control Argentine Ants on my property. - *LB*