

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Taming Our Tiny Ant Friends

Dear EcoGirl: Help! Ants are invading my home. How can I banish them without resorting to a toxic spray?
Signed, Under Siege in Guerneville

Dear Under Siege: Yes, it certainly can feel like an invasion when ants in their (quite reasonable) quest for food and shelter cross the boundaries of our homes, finding warm refuge from the weather and feasts in the crumbs and dribbles that we don't even notice.

Still, you're smart to resist the temptation to grab a poison spray, because it can harm the health of yourself and your family — and not even be worth the risk. A Stanford study found that toxic pesticides are no more effective than household cleansers in reducing home ant populations. Also, when ants' homes are under stress, from winter rainstorms or summer droughts, it can be hard to keep them out no matter what you do.

A better way to preserve both your health and sanity is to use these easy less-toxic methods for constructively managing one of our most prevalent earth companions.

Your First Steps

- **Eliminate what's attracting the ants.** Follow their trail to discover what food needs to be cleaned up, sealed up, or put in the fridge. Empty the trash and wash the can. If they've found your pet food bowl, place it in a larger dish filled with a soapy water moat.

- **Block their entry point.** Follow the ants' trail back to where it enters the house, and plug those holes with caulk or toothpaste.

- **Wipe paths with a clean soapy sponge,** to remove the ants' pheromone trail. For more potency, add vinegar.

- **Be consistent about keeping your kitchen clean,** wiping counters and putting food away. Avoid leaving food elsewhere in the house. I call these little guys "Housekeeping Ants" because (like a white-gloved matron) they show me where I need more attention in my housecleaning practices!

Kick It Up A Notch

If, even after the above steps, your ants still persist in their misadventures, try these additional methods.

- **Remove outside attractants.** Look at the outside wall of their entry point. Is something there attracting them, such as a garbage can, compost pile, or vegetation? Consider pulling that away from the house.

- **Disrupt ant trails by placing pungent scents at key spots,** such as entry points and around unavoidable enticements like houseplants. Just strategically sprinkle dried or fresh herbs, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, chili pepper, bay leaves, rosemary, spearmint, catnip, and sage. (Use whatever you have around.) Or make a spray by brewing any of these herbs into a tea; diluting their essential oils in water; or warming orange peels in water. (The latter has become my current favorite.)

If you want a ready-made option, consider the less-toxic insecticide Orange Guard, made from a by-product of steam-distilled citrus peels. All ingredients are FDA food-grade and GRAS (Generally Recognized As Safe), and the product also works on other insects, such as aphids and fleas. Tests show that it has no significant toxicity to humans, though contact can irritate eyes or skin. Orange Guard is at stores (such as Sebastopol Hardware and

Friedman's) or see <www.orange-guard.com>.

If It's Still Serious

For stubborn and significant problems, consider these next-tier approaches.

- **Use boric acid baits.** If you truly can't stop ants from coming into your home, this less-toxic pesticide can eliminate ants at their nest. In addition to boric acid (a mined odorless white powder used for a variety of insects), most baits include a sweetening lure and come in a convenient liquid form. Place baits out of the reach of curious pets and children.

Important: Read ant bait labels to avoid those with toxics such as arsenic, which can poison children, pets, and wildlife.

- **Hire an expert** who specializes in less-toxic remedies, such as bio-pest, 542-3030, <www.bio-pest.com>.

And, while protecting your turf, remember the big picture — that the 10,000 species of ants around the globe are an essential part of nature's miraculous interwoven systems. Plus these social insects can lift 50 times their own weight! How cool is that?

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl believes that everyone can be a superhero for the planet. Then she shows you how!"

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