

Ants

You can come across them on their own or in regimented columns, on the ground or climbing up walls, in your house or garden, large or small, but they are always busy, some frantic and others calmer, but never lazy, never idle. They are ants, there are thousands of species of them and their habits and communities differ immensely, as does their size which can go from a couple of millimetres to a few centimetres.

Ants belong to the hymenoptera

family, the same order as bees which, like them, live in colonies. In all ant species, the different individuals have precise roles that can change over the course of their lives as they gain experience. Some species have a proper caste system with ants of very different shapes and sizes. Some build enormous nests while others live in small groups with temporary nests which they move around when necessary. Some species, on the other

hand, are nomadic, continuously on the move and only stopping to sleep at night. Ants can often be seen fighting viciously, sometimes they will even attack other nests, stealing their eggs and larvae and using the adults which hatch as slaves. Some species of ants are "farmer" ants, looking after aphids and ladybirds on plants, protecting them from predators and moving them to fresher leaves so they can suck the sugary liquid (honeydew) they secrete.

They may be useful, but...



There is no doubt ants are fascinating and useful but at times they can be a real nuisance. They get everywhere and there seems to be no way of stopping them as they appear between gaps in your wood flooring, cracks in the wall or goodness knows where. In spring and autumn you can sometimes find your home invaded by flying ants; they arrive

without warning, usually at sunset, and infiltrate your home in the thousands. They are queens and males and it is their job to build new nests. They create swarms where they meet other ants from other nests to create a new genetic mix. Once the females have been fertilised, they look for somewhere suitable to set up a nest, rip off their

wings and start building. Initially they are on their own, but they quickly lay eggs and are soon served by numerous workers. The males, on the other hand, die shortly after mating as their work is done.

What to do if you have an infestation

Ants are useful insects, so we shouldn't try to kill them every chance we get, we should only act when we really have to. How to deal with an infestation depends on the species and the time of year. As a general rule, it is always best to use bait which can be in a gel, which you put in "houses", or granules. The ants enter the trap, take the bait and go back to their nest where they feed the other ants with the bait through trophallaxis, mouth-to-mouth feeding. In this way, the entire colony is killed without widespread use

of insecticides, no "innocent" insects are killed in the process and our homes are not contaminated. For some species, such as the cocktail ant, a black ant with a red head which typically builds its nests in roofs and can be seen climbing up walls in long columns, bait works mainly in the spring when they are starving after the long winter and don't have many alternatives. As the months pass, it is a lot harder to trick them, so time is of the essence.

There are some species of ants which

build their nests on the ground and they are best dealt with directly with highly residual liquid insecticide. Sometimes it is difficult to spot nests or it is impossible to get to them, so the best thing is to create a protective barrier with powders or spray. Always follow the instructions on the product and take extra care when using powders, especially very fine ones, which can easily be carried by the wind and inhaled.

