

Herb Garden Diary



The Purple Gate Farm Newsletter

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Our Herb Garden Diary Newsletter explores herbal knowledge, practical garden information with historical insight and current research to reveal the delight and enrichment of life by the growing and using of herbs. We explore the seasons in our south central Texas gardens and share our gardening experiences in this environment.



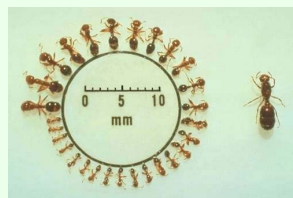
Ants In The Pants

by Mary H. Mills

As a young woman, I was fascinated by these industrious little marvels of the insect world. I even wrote a paper in biology class in high school on the extraordinary little creatures. But that was then, when I was in Alaska, and ant infestations were far away. It is easy to admire at a distance.

Now residing in Texas I have spent a lot of time thinking about how to make these remarkable creatures live somewhere other than in my gardens. I would like to get them away from my feet, legs, arms and pants when I am working in the garden. Even the smallest, almost impossible to see ants leave a large blister when they bite. (where does all that fluid they inject come from?)

I have often done the Ant-Two-Step, the Ant Rumba and the Ant Stomp, jumping up and down and dancing wildly in my garden. I began searching for solutions to these distressing reoccurring events. Right off the bat I discovered there are many kinds of ants.



At the top of the list in Texas when the subject of ants comes up are the demonic Fire Ants. No wonder.... It is estimated that fire ants inhabit over 320 million acres throughout the southern U.S.

And remember, there are a variety of native ants and other imported ants as well. There are Carpenter Ants, Acrobat Ants, Pharaoh Ants, Little Black Ants, and Pavement Ants. More interesting are the Crazy Ants, Caribbean Crazy Ants and Crazy Raspberry Ants. I wonder what makes them "Crazy"?

Then there are the Odorous House Ants, White Footed Ants and Thief Ants. And, (gasp,) there are even Ghost Ants. And finally there are impostor ants like ants commonly called "Velvet ants".

Velvet ants are not ants at all, but a specialized group of insects belonging to the wasp family Mutillidae. Mutillid wasps can be found in Texas during the summertime in both urban and rural habitats. They are often referred to as velvet ants because the females are wingless, antlike and often covered with a velvety "fur".

The experts recommend you know which ants you are dealing with to effectively control them. (Check out "Genera of Texas", a handy field guide to Texas ants published by Texas AgriLife Extension for more information on this subject.)

This looked like a life-time committed study but I pushed on. At the beginning of my study of how to control the ants in my gardens I collected the following organic ant-repellent recommendations:

ORGANIC- Including Many Herbal Repellants...

Pouring 2 to 3 gallons of boiling water onto a mound will kill about 60% of the ants, but the others will move to another location. Note that

the boiling water will also kill any vegetation coming into contact with the water.

Ants dislike lavender (*Lavandula*,) pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*,) African marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) and chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*).

Lupin blooms, crushed and rubbed on the bottom of fruit trees early in the year will stop ants climbing the bark.

Tansy under fruit trees, roses, raspberries. Deters flying insects, Japanese beetles, striped cucumber beetles, squash bugs and ants.

Ants hate moving over chalk or pepper. Spread liberal amounts of either around the garden. Use cayenne pepper if possible.

Diatomaceous Earth or DE is a great, non-toxic deterrent for all manner of insects. It acts like ground glass on the skeleton structure of insects like ants, cockroaches, fleas, and some other pests, but won't harm beneficial insects or animals.

Orange Oil: (d-limonene) Mix a few ounces of this per gallon of water: a teaspoon of liquid soap and about three or four ounces of molasses. Just mix it all together and drench the mound. You may need to mix up a few gallons in order to fully drench a large mound. This will "melt" those little boogers... (this seems cruel!)

Other organic and natural methods include mound-drench products comprised of botanical and biological materials.

I tried many of the recommended organic solutions and either I did not identify the correct species of ant or I was not persistent enough in my attempts. After several more Wild Ant-Dance episodes, I had enough! I had come to the conclusion that there are creatures that you cannot just let live in your environment.

Enough!!!

I planned to KILL them...Preferably with something that does not kill me too. I am deeply

interested in various MURDEROUS methods and study constantly on the subject.

Less than Organic methods:

Baking yeast is lethal to ants. Mix it with a sugar solution and spread it on pieces of bark placed around the garden. (Lethal? sometimes this idea is somewhat satisfying).

Camphor, naphthalene and kerosene will quickly dispel ant nests. (While rubbing the red bumps on my legs, I might be tempted to light a match...)

There are hundreds of commercial Ant Bait products that promise success if children and pets don't find the bait first.

I plan to continue exploring this subject. The more I learn about the extent of ant colonies, I teeter on despair. In the meantime I am suspicious of and avoid any item sitting on the ground that could harbor a colony of ants. I am vigilant when I begin digging anywhere to check for tell tale signs of any mounds or holes in the ground. When I miss the clues I continue to perfect my Ant-Stomp and Ant Brush Off- Dance skills.

Prevention of ant stings

Look for fire ant mounds and take care not to stand on or near them. Teach children about fire ant hazards. Alert visitors to your landscape that fire ant mounds are present. Wear protective clothing during outdoor activities that might take place near fire ant nests. Wear boots or tuck pant legs into socks. Control ants where they occur in areas used frequently by people and pets. Use insect repellents on clothing or footwear. These treatments may temporarily discourage foraging ants.

If your cautions do not work and you have done the "Fire Ant Twist", try these:

Treating Fire Ant stings

Remove the stinging ants. Because worker ants use their jaws (mandibles) to gain leverage to sting, they are fixed tightly to the skin or clothing. Merely jumping into water or running water across ants from a spigot will not remove them. The best method is to rub them off briskly by hand or using a cloth.

For minor stinging incidents. With the only symptoms being pain and the development of pustules, stings can be treated with over-the-counter products that relieve pain and prevent infection. I found that a cotton swab soaked in ammonia and pressed against the ant bit area will relieve some pain.

A number of serious multiple stinging incidents have occurred indoors in Texas.

[\[http://www.extension.org/pages/Fire_Ant_Stings\]](http://www.extension.org/pages/Fire_Ant_Stings) **For severe stinging incidents.** If a sting

causes severe chest pain, nausea, severe sweating, loss of breath, serious swelling, or slurred speech, the person should be taken to an emergency medical facility immediately.

Attracting Beneficial Insects

Attracting the right kind of insects to your garden can help control unwanted pests. Some herbs can provide food and shelter for beneficial insects. These beneficial insects have short mouth parts and therefore need plants that have groups of very small flowers. Dill, yarrow and coriander attract parasitic wasps. These wasps parasitize (destroy) the eggs of the cucumber beetle. Braconid wasps lay their eggs on the back of tomato hornworms. As the eggs

hatch, the larvae burrow into the hornworm to live and eat. If you see this in your garden, do not destroy the hornworm! It will provide many beneficial wasps for your garden. Another two of the best beneficial insects are soldier beetles and tachinid flies, which lay eggs inside adult cucumber beetles. Grow herbs to attract beneficial insects near your vegetables for best results.

The Green Corn Project

In February our speaker was Mitch Mills, on the Board of The Green Corn Project.

The Green Corn Project brings information about becoming a little more self sufficient in our digital age with the support of enthusiastic and energetic volunteers.



Bud and I were intrigued. We signed up to volunteer on April 24 for the last “dig in” for the year.



A finished bed.



In a few hours these volunteers can begin the process of turning unproductive backyard soils into rich, organic, garden soils that will support the production of year - round fresh food for a family. To date they have created 150 gardens and gardeners in Austin and are still counting.

In addition one of the volunteer leaders, David Huebel, demonstrated how to create a double dig garden bed.



He dug out soil, and



loosened the next layer of soil.



Moved soil from a new row to fill the first row.



then added compost.

This soil preparation gives these gardens a real good start.

The garden was planted with vegetables and herbs. Herbs were planted with the vegetables and in garden areas around the school building. It was especially rewarding to see the elementary school children working in the four beds. They cleaned, prepared the beds and planted. They asked a lot of questions and learned the names of many of the vegetables and herbs they were working with. Many of the volunteers were also learning a lot, including Bud and I.

I hope the children all can be present for harvest and food preparation. Many took home plants with their mothers and grandmothers to plant at home.

This is a wonderful organization that deserves our support. They supply all the tools, compost and plants for the gardens.

Organic practices may take extended periods of time to develop chemical free and earth friendly gardens and the Green Corn Project is there to get the process started and work with the gardeners to develop their confidence and abilities to have sustainable gardens and fresh produce.

This organizations represents the best Austin has to offer. The Green Corn Project translates catch words like **Bio-intensive, organic,** and **sustainable** into meaningful, food producing gardens. The website tells their on-going story and is a must to add to your list of favorite websites. www.greencornproject.org.

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Here is something interesting about our insect friends:

Smithwick, Noah. *The Evolution of a State or Recollections of Old Texas Days*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. P. 244

It was, I believe in 1858 that the grasshopper plague visited our section. They came on the wing and in such numbers that the sun was literally darkened with them. Anyone who has ever looked toward the zenith during a snowstorm will remember that the snowflakes looked like myriads of black specks. That is just the appearance the grasshoppers presented when first discovered. Soon they began to drop and the ground was alive with them. It was late in the fall and they went into winter quarters, devouring every green thing in sight except the rag-weed, which is intensely bitter, utilizing the denuded bushes and weeds for roosting purposes. When the cold nights came on they were frozen on their perches, and in this state they fell easy victims to the hogs, which devoured millions of them, but there were still enough left to seed the ground for the next season's crop, which they did by boring holes into the earth with their tail ends. They did not distribute themselves evenly, some farms being almost free of them. On one such place there were only a few dropped down, and the owner thereof, mustering his whole family when the hoppers began to light, gathered tin pans, beating them energetically until the main body of the pests passed over. After his neighbors had received the full force of the invasion he was wont to attribute their affliction to shiftlessness. "If you had just got out and fought them, as I did, you might have saved your crop." Pretty soon, though, there came on another detachment. When they began to drop our hero got out with his tin pans and brooms and "beat" and "shooed" till he was exhausted, but the hoppers kept on dropping, and lost no time in getting to work, cleaning out everything in sight.