

QUESTION: Why Are There Ants on My Citrus Tree?

By Sharon Zornes

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Most ant species on citrus trees are there to feed on honeydew excreted by various soft scales, mealybugs, whiteflies, and aphids. Ants can appear on infested trees in mass to farm the sap feeders and protect them from their natural enemies. The best way to control the ants is to control the sap-sucking insect they are farming. Getting rid of the ants requires you to attack both the ants and the sap-feeding insects simultaneously.

There are numerous species of ants present in citrus orchards, however the most common in Southern California are the Argentine ant and the southern fire ant. The first task is to identify the primary ant species, because management tactics depend upon which species is present.

The Argentine ant is small, and uniformly deep brown. They travel along trails and build their nests underground. Their numbers peak in mid-summer through early fall.

The southern fire ant is light reddish brown with a black hairy abdomen. They swarm in late spring and early summer and build their nests in loose mounds near the base of the tree. These ants will sting and bite.

Following is a link to help identify the ant species: <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/C107/m107bpants.html>

Getting Rid of the Ants

Prune the citrus tree back until it is not touching any building, deck or other structure that might enable the ants to access the tree's canopy. Remove any suckers from around the bottom of the tree and branches within 12 to 30 inches of the ground. This will make applying a sticky barrier around the trunk of the tree easier.

Apply masking tape or tree wrap in a band about 6 inches wide around the trunk of the affected tree, about 2 to 4 feet from the ground. Paint a sticky barrier in the center of the tape, being careful not to get it on the trunk. Use polybutene materials as the sticky barrier. The sticky material will last 2 to 10 months, depending on the weather conditions. Check the sticky barrier frequently and reapply as needed or replace it if it is clogged with ants.

You can also place bait traps around the base of the tree and either side of any ant trails. To determine which bait to use, identify the primary ant species; Fire ants are protein feeders (preferring oil-based baits), whereas gray and black ants are sugar feeders (preferring liquid sugar baits).

Following is a link to UC Pest management guidelines for ants:

<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/agriculture/citrus/ants/>

Getting Rid of the Sap Suckers

Now that you've tackled the ants, check the tree canopy with a magnifying glass to identify the sap-feeding insect. Blackish fungi may appear on fruit and the underside of leaves when ants increase the abundance of phloem sap sucking insects, including aphids, mealybugs, soft scales, and whiteflies. You

can apply insecticidal soap for soft bodied pests like aphids, mealybugs, or whitefly larvae. Use horticultural oil to smother scale insect larvae. Prune out any sections that are heavily infested and bag the material immediately.

Once ants are controlled and the sap-feeding insect numbers are knocked back, these pests can often be kept in check by natural predators, especially if you avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides in your garden. The best way to keep your citrus tree free of pests and disease is to provide the optimal growing conditions for a healthy, happy tree in your garden.

Following is a link to a UC publication on caring for backyard citrus trees

https://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/Fruits_&_Nuts/Citrus/

Sharon Zornes has been a UCCE Master Gardener since 2020.