

## European fire ants in the workplace

### What are European fire ants?

European fire ants (*Myrmica rubra*) are small (4–5 mm long), reddish-brown ants native to Europe and Asia. These ants are very aggressive. If their nests are disturbed, the ants swarm quickly and deliver painful stings.



European fire ant (Photo: Alex Wild)

### Where are European fire ants found?

European fire ants were first seen in British Columbia in 2010. Since then, they have been found in the Lower Mainland, the Fraser Valley, and southern Vancouver Island. Their nests are found in moist, shaded places such as lawns and grassy areas, under decaying logs, and in yard waste and potted plants. Because these ants do not create a visible mound, it may not be obvious that an area is infested.

European fire ants spread from place to place when people move infested soil or plants. The ants also spread naturally as they find new places to

live. More than one nest can be built in the same area. Up to four nests can be found in one square metre. Each nest may have a few hundred to a thousand ants, including up to 20 queens laying eggs. As a result, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate these insects.

### Are my workers at risk?

Anyone who disturbs fire ant nests is at risk of being stung. Fire ants may be found in places such as:

- Construction sites
- Properties with landscaping
- Equestrian centres (stables, riding facilities, etc.)
- Garden centres and nurseries
- Urban parks
- Botanical gardens
- Community gardens
- Golf courses



This is a close-up of a European fire ant nest. The nest looks like a loose patch of sand or soil. (Photo: Susan Horton)

## What can I do to stop the spread of European fire ants on my property?

- Identify areas where you think fire ants may be present. Fire ants love heat and moisture and may build nests in tall grass, raised garden beds, and under paving stones, ornamental rocks, and landscaping wood.
- Remove items that trap heat and moisture, or place gravel beneath them (for example, under paving stones) to dissipate heat.
- Reduce irrigation and keep grass short.
- Limit the number of items (for example, lawn ornaments and stored equipment) you bring into an infested or potentially infested area.
- Inspect any materials (for example, soils, mulch, and potted plants) being transferred to your property. If you find ants, do not purchase the materials. Return them to the supplier.
- Educate your workers about the hazards of these ants and how to protect themselves from being stung.
- Properly store any food items and food waste.

## What happens if fire ants sting me or my workers?

The European fire ant has a stinger that can inject venom under the skin. After a sting, a burning sensation develops and can last from 30 minutes to 2 hours. The burning is followed by itchiness that can last up to a week. At a minimum, stings cause swelling, redness, and discomfort. In rare cases, they can result in a severe allergic reaction.

If a sting occurs, brush the ants away from the skin with a gloved hand or cloth. Do not crush the ants, as this will encourage more of them to sting. An antihistamine can relieve minor swelling and irritation. See a doctor if the symptoms get worse.

To help prevent stings, wear clothing and footwear that cover exposed skin. For example, wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, socks, closed-toe shoes (or rubber boots), and gloves. Pants can be tied or taped to socks or boots.

## More information and resources

BC Inter-Ministry Invasive Species Working Group (IMISWG): European fire ants

[http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hra/invasive-species/fire\\_ants.htm](http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hra/invasive-species/fire_ants.htm)

BC IMISWG: European fire ants in British Columbia (fact sheet)

[http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hra/invasive-species/Publications/European\\_Fire\\_Ants\\_in\\_BC.pdf](http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hra/invasive-species/Publications/European_Fire_Ants_in_BC.pdf)

Invasive Species Council of British Columbia: European fire ant

<http://bcinvasives.ca/invasive-species/identify/invasive-species/invasive-insects-fungi/european-fire-ant>

Dr. Robert Higgins: The European fire ant in British Columbia

[http://faculty.tru.ca/rhiggins/myrmica\\_rubra\\_index.htm](http://faculty.tru.ca/rhiggins/myrmica_rubra_index.htm)

University of Maine, School of Biology and Ecology: The European fire ant

<http://umaine.edu/publications/2550e/>