

Flooding and Fire Ants

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When storms cause flooding in areas of Texas infested by the red imported fire ant, these ants can pose a serious threat to people. Flood waters will not drown fire ants. Instead, fire ant colonies emerge from the soil, form a loose ball or ribbon, and float or flow with the water until they reach a dry area or object that the ants can crawl up on. As the flood water recedes, these colonies can be found on piles of debris or in homes and other buildings until they build new mounds in the soil.

During flooding

Avoid contact with floating mats of fire ants. If you are in a row boat, do not touch the ants with the oars. If you must work in flood water, try to dress appropriately in rubber boots, rain gear and cuffed gloves so fire ants cannot reach your skin. If ants do contact the skin, remove them immediately by rubbing them off. If ants are clinging to submerged skin, a spray made of diluted, biodegradable dishwashing liquid may help to immobilize and drown them. Tests have shown that 2 ounces of Dove® dishwashing liquid mixed with 1 gallon of water is effective when sprayed on floating ants.

After flooding

Be very cautious. Remember that fire ants can be almost anywhere—under debris, in furniture, under carpet strips. Wear gloves, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, socks and shoes to protect yourself. Spray your shoes and lower pants legs with an insect repellent that contains DEET. If you are using a shovel or other type of tool, spread talcum or baby powder on the handle. Fire ants cannot climb onto vertical surfaces dusted with talcum powder unless the surface gets wet or the powder is rubbed off.

If you see fire ants in a pile of debris you must handle, be sure to use a shovel or other tool. Or, treat the fire ants first with a fact-acting household or lawn and garden insecticide. Aerosol products containing pyrethrins or pyrethrum (tetramethrin or allethrin) labeled for use on “ants” or “crawling insects” will kill the ants quickly. Spray as many of the ants as possible. Also spray surfaces and cracks of infested objects and debris, but do not use these sprays on ponds because they are toxic to aquatic organisms.

Fire ant baits should not be used immediately after a flood. They are slow acting and ineffective at this time because worker ants are not foraging for food.

If you are stung, use an over-the-counter medicine for insect bites or stings within the first 15 to 20 minutes. Some people report that the irritation of a fire ant sting can be relieved by applying a 50:50 solution of bleach and water. Other home remedies include ammonia, meat tenderizer, tea tree oil and camphor. An antibiotic cream can

help prevent secondary infection. Many people are allergic to fire ant venom, and may even suffer anaphylactic shock. If a person has shortness of breath, unusual swelling of the sting area or nausea, get medical help right away.

You can control fire ants on your property, but when flooding occurs along rivers and streams, floating ant colonies may arrive from other areas. Know what to do and how to protect yourself and your family.

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