



Henderson County Master Gardeners Weekly News Article April 02, 2018

The Texas Leaf Cutting Ant

by Barbara Thompson, HCMGA Intern

The Texas leaf cutting ant (*Atta texana*) can be extremely destructive to landscape plants, gardens and some agricultural crops (mainly young pine seedlings). Their name comes from their habit of cutting leaves from a variety of plants. They are also known as the town ant, cut ant, parasol ant, fungus ant and night ant.

Leaf cutting ants live in large colonies of up to 2 million ants. Individual colonies can exist for years. The colonies are restricted to deep, well drained sandy or loamy soils. There are 129 Texas counties and 13 Louisiana parishes where Texas leaf cutting ants are known to occur. The colonies can cover an area up to an acre with more than 1000 mounds.

The Texas leaf cutting ant is considered a pest and a farmer. The ants do not eat the leaves they collect, but take them into their underground nest where they use the leaves to raise a fungus garden. As the fungus grows, it is eaten by the ants and fed to the larvae. This fungus is their only known source of food.

Below ground, their nest consists of several chambers that may reach 15 to 25 feet deep. All chambers are interconnected by tunnels. Vertical tunnels extend to mound openings, and lateral foraging tunnels may lead outward 500 feet. This large complex nest structure makes control with insecticides difficult.

Leaf cutting ants have clearly defined foraging trails. These foraging trails will be littered with pieces of leaves that can be traced to a feeder hole. They commonly travel 600 feet or more to reach a suitable plant. Once they locate a plant, they attack in large numbers, cutting and carrying the leaf fragments. Small to medium sized trees can be stripped in one night.

Hundreds of ants can be seen picking up and carrying off the piles of leaves that accumulate below the plant under attack. Leaf fragments are carried like an umbrella over their heads, hence the common name “parasol ant”. At the nest entrance the ants chew the leaves into small pieces that are suited for their underground fungus gardens.

Their activity depends largely on temperatures along their foraging trails. During the summer, the ants remain underground during the day, often plugging the central nest holes to regulate temperature. When the temperature drops below 86, the ants emerge to forage throughout the night.

Control of the Texas leaf cutting ant is difficult. The large size and complexity of their nests make it difficult to obtain control with dust, liquid or granular insecticides. Since they only eat the fungus they grow, they do not respond to most ant baits. Amdro Ant Block is currently the only widely available product that is labeled for control of the leaf cutting ant that contains a special formulation of hydramethylnon. A Texas Forest Service test indicates that the bait is about 30% effective in eliminating colonies in one application.

For more information, call 903-675-6130, email hendersonCMGA@gmail.com or visit www.henderson-co-tx-mg.org