

We're Serving Ants with Everything

Dr Richard Dean

Ants in the house? Ants in your pants? Or both physically and metaphorically, the one follows the other. Professor Edward Wilson at Harvard, a world authority on the ecology and behaviour of ants, once said "we need ants, but ants don't need us". Actually, ants do need us, a bit more than Prof Wilson imagined, or perhaps in a different context than Prof Wilson implied.

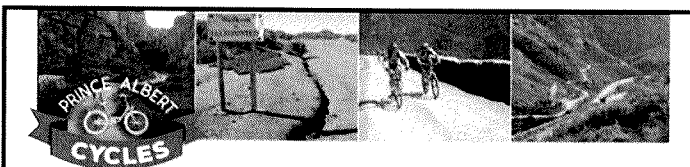
Ants don't need us to provide food, but they do enjoy what we may inadvertently leave in the kitchen. For some species of Karoo ants, they need us to provide easily accessible water. In the summertime in Prince Albert, for example, our gardens are full of ants, running over our feet, biting our toes and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The most common and abundant culprit is the pugnacious ant, 'malmier' in Afrikaans (*Anoplolepis custodiens*), a species with an almost infinite range of sizes between about 3 mm and 8 mm from head to tail. Pugnacious ants, in Prince Albert at any rate, are a man-made problem. These ants are rare outside of the village, except in moist patches such as near livestock drinking places, farm dams and so on. Pugnacious ants need water and thrive in the well-watered gardens of the village. This is one reason why pugnacious ants invade houses – if our house (a sample of one) is typical, then where the ants penetrate the building is next to, or nearby, the plumbing in the kitchen. There are, of course, other reasons – sugar and any meaty or fatty scraps are also attractive. Pugnacious ants eat anything, dog food, cat food (especially 'Whiskas'). They are primarily scavengers, feeding on (e.g.) dead mice or frogs or beetles, but also catch, kill and eat invertebrates such as spiders, termites, grasshoppers and caterpillars of many species of moths and butterflies. They are efficient scouts – although the ants entered our house in the kitchen,

for example, they soon spread out around the house, adding to the 'ant problem'. In the wild, pugnacious ants similarly scout the areas around their (limited) habitat, and if a source of food, such as dead frog, is found the scout ants release a chemical trail (of pheromones) to alert their sisters (all worker ants are female, and all the sisters in one colony are genetically identical) to recruit more workers to carry the food or liquids back to the nest.

Pugnacious ants can also be annoying in the garden. They collect young scale insects and move them on to tender young citrus leaves so that the scale can feed well and produce honey secretions that the ants (and birds) collect. Before you know what is happening your orange tree is wilting and scaly and there are thousands of ants traveling up and down the stem. Painting a band of whitewash around the stem of the tree used to be done to discourage the ants – it does not work, but if nothing else, makes the gardener feel proactive in the war against the ants. Ants can also milk aphids and mealybugs and are usually responsible for outbreaks of these insects on Aloes and vines. Ants on citrus trees has been the subject of numerous research projects sponsored by the state and by commercial citrus growers.

Other small black or brown house ants also invade our privacy. Many species of 'house' ants are listed in the recently published book on Southern African ants written by Peter Slingsby (*Ants of southern Africa*, an ant book for all).

Keeping ants under control in the house is difficult. Ants are usually mostly in the kitchen, and because of the close proximity of ants to food and cooking utensils, poisons and ant repelling chemicals should not be used. The only 'green' way of dealing with them is to make sure that there are no tempting food scraps anywhere, to keep jams and honey in the 'fridge, and sugar in an ant proof container. If there are no rewards, the ants may even go away. Or, if you are a believer in Hindu astrology, in which ants are linked to good luck and wealth, you may even encourage them to stay... but in their place, of course. ■



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