

Carpenter Ants

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Release: Week of August 1, 2022

When a tree is cut down or a dead branch removed and carpenter ants are found inside, it is often assumed they caused the tree or branch to die. This is not the case. The ants are only taking advantage of already dead and decaying wood.

Carpenter ants are not plant pests and do not attack trees. They are found in trees or branches because they burrow into and nest in moist, decaying wood. They play an important role in nature by breaking down dead wood similar to earthworms breaking down dead plant material in soil.

Carpenter ants can invade buildings, especially where there is a moisture problem. As they burrow and enlarge nests, structural damage can occur. Carpenter ants do not eat wood. They eat other insects, aphid honeydew, sweets, meat, and fats.

Areas around and under windows, roof eaves, decks, and porches are more likely to be infested by carpenter ants because these areas are most vulnerable to moisture. The best way to avoid damage to buildings is to prevent or resolve moisture issues.

If carpenter ants are present in a building, they are a sign of a larger problem. If the moisture issue is not, more serious mold growth and structural damage will occur. Their presence in a building might also be a sign of termites. Carpenter ants will burrow into wood damaged by termites.

Carpenter ants found in or on a tree may also be a sign of decay within the tree. Such trees should be monitored for signs of dieback. As is the case with all trees, dead branches should be removed for safety.

The two types of carpenter ants in Nebraska are black and red ants. Black carpenter ants are most common. Foraging workers are quite large, ranging in size from one-fourth to five-eighths of an inch. Red carpenter ants have a reddish head and thorax and a black abdomen and range in size from one-eighth to three-eighths of an inch.

Both carpenter ants have a winged stage. When a colony becomes very large, usually 6 to 10 years old and about 2000 workers, winged reproductives called swarmers are produced. These set off to start new or satellite colonies. Swarming often takes place from March into June.

Swarmers cause concern because they are confused for termites. Termites also have a swarming stage, however, the two insects are easily distinguishable. When found, they can be brought to a Nebraska Extension office or pest control operator for identification.

If swarmers, winged ants, are found inside a home, this is a sign a nest may be in the structure. If unwinged carpenter ants are found indoors, this may indicate a nest in the building or that there is a colony nearby and ants are simply foraging for food as other types of ants do.

Since carpenter ants do not eat wood, another sign of their presence is sawdust. They keep galleries clean by removing sawdust created by tunneling. This sawdust is pushed out of galleries and may be seen at the base of trees or in the home. If you look close, the sawdust will have ant parts in it.

We don't worry about carpenter ants outdoors. They are an important part of the ecosystem. To prevent infestations in buildings, trees and bushes can be trimmed so they don't touch a building. Moisture problems like leaky roofs, windows and doorframes and plumbing problems should be repaired.

Paint and/or seal exposed wood during construction before it becomes wet. Saturated wood, even if not decaying, can be attractive to carpenter ants. Replace any ant or termite damaged wood or water damaged wood and eliminate wood to soil contact.