

Red Imported Fire Ants

Status

- Painful venomous sting
- Bites
- Possible health threat

General Information

Red imported fire ants (RIFA) are very aggressive and invasive ants. Red imported fire ants are called “imported” because they are not native to this country. It is believed that they came to the United States from South America aboard cargo ships that docked in Mobile, Alabama, in the 1930s. RIFA vigorously defend their nests, attack in large numbers, and sting repeatedly. They also attack agricultural workers, compete with beneficial insects, and devour important crops.



Red Imported Fire Ant

Solenopsis invicta

Health Risks

Red imported fire ants inflict painful **stings** and inject **venom** that causes **pustules** and **itching** for up to two weeks. RIFA stings are serious and can be fatal for the very young, the elderly, and anyone who is allergic to the venom. Humans are not the only ones subject to attacks; RIFA are attracted to pet food left outdoors and will sting when disturbed by a hungry pet. These attacks can be quite serious for pets since the first part of the animal to get stung is usually its sensitive muzzle. If there are enough stings in the right place, the swelling caused by the venom can obstruct breathing. The toll taken on wildlife can also be considerable. The numbers and variety of reptiles and amphibians remaining in areas infested by RIFA is a fraction of what was there before. Any ground or low nesting birds will be impacted as well. While the ant’s need for moisture will limit the wild land infestation to wetlands, one half of threatened animal species are at least somewhat dependent on wetlands.



Red Imported Fire Ant stings

How Can You Identify RIFA Mounds?

In southern California, RIFA colonies rarely build the large mounds typical of RIFA in other parts of the country. Almost all of the mounds in Orange County are found in irrigated areas, most often turf which gets mowed every week. Look for a patch of fine granular soil where it doesn’t belong, for example, in the middle of a lawn. It is possible that if a colony has settled into an irrigated planter or other landscaped area, a mound will develop, usually at the base of a shrub. Another common location is adjacent to a hardscape feature like a large rock or a concrete walkway. These large, dense objects are attractive to RIFA because they store heat during the day and release it slowly during the night. The constant temperature provided by the release of this heat allows the colony to reproduce and gather food twenty-four hours a day.



Red Imported Fire Ant mound in a planter at the edge of a curb

Double the Danger!

Red imported fire ants attack by biting their victims with their powerful jaws while stinging them repeatedly.



Ants have two biting jaws (mandibles) with many sharp teeth



Adult female ants have a stinger that delivers venom

Reporting the Problem

Because RIFA represent such a serious threat, homeowners may be tempted to treat on their own. Unlike other vector issues, the Orange County Vector Control District (OCVCD) discourages the public from trying to control RIFA on their property. RIFA are considered an exotic pest, and as such, must be tracked; every known site should be reported. The procedure for killing ant colonies is far different from killing individual ants. OCVCD Inspectors typically use an **insect growth regulator (IGR)**, a product that stops ant larvae from maturing into adults. This results in a decrease in replacement ants and as the workers die off, so does the colony. If you find a RIFA colony, please contact OCVCD to report it so appropriate control measures can be implemented.

