



# Red imported fire ant

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Red imported fire ant (RIFA), *Solenopsis invicta*, is one of the most serious ant pests in the world. If established, they could severely damage the local environment, Australia's outdoor lifestyle, and agricultural and tourism industries. They can also inflict a painful, fiery sting, which in rare cases can cause an acute allergic reaction.

RIFA prey on invertebrates and vertebrates. They often dominate new environments due to their aggressive nature and venomous sting used to kill their prey and defend their nest.

They swarm in large numbers and attack anything or anyone disturbing their nest, which enables them to overwhelm and kill prey much larger than themselves. Some form vast super-colonies made up of many interconnected nests, with millions of workers.



Image courtesy of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program.

**In Western Australia, Red imported fire ant is a declared pest under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007*. Suspect sightings must be reported to the WA Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. See back for contact details.**

## Why is RIFA a problem?

### Human health

When a RIFA mound is disturbed, thousands of ants swarm to the surface and repeatedly sting the intruder. RIFA inflict painful stings, which in some people can cause an allergic reaction. Multiple stings give the sensation that the body is on fire. Itchy pustules can form at sting sites and may become infected and cause scarring if broken. If not controlled in Australia, RIFA could cause an extra 140,000 medical consultations and 3,000 anaphylactic reactions a year.

### Environment

The ecological impacts of RIFA are worse than most ants because they form 'super colonies' that spread quickly. RIFA feed voraciously on plants and small animals, including insects, lizards, frogs, birds and mammals. RIFA would likely cause extinction of some species if established in an area. By competing with native plant and insect-eaters, and by eating and damaging seeds, RIFA can affect entire ecosystems.



Image courtesy of the United States Department of Agriculture.

### Economic

In the United States, RIFA costs \$7 billion a year in damage and control. They are known to protect (harvest) horticultural pest insects like scales, aphids and whiteflies in order to eat the honeydew these insects produce. They also rob beehives and destroy crops by tunnelling through roots and stems. During dry times they dominate the margins of dams, making it impossible for livestock to reach water without being seriously stung. An established population could affect the export of items to RIFA free countries, and make farming unviable in some communities. Nesting behaviour can destroy equipment, such as irrigation systems and sensitive electrical equipment, and can damage machinery during harvesting operations.

### Outdoor lifestyle

RIFA mounds can cause extensive problems in lawns, sporting fields, golf courses and backyards – potentially making them unusable. Everyday activities such as picnics, visiting parks and playgrounds, and sporting activities would become impossible in areas affected by these aggressive ants.



Young nests can start out as small piles of excavated soil.



Red imported fire ants greatly vary in size.

Image courtesy of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program.

## What to look for

- Hard to distinguish from common native ants.
- Small ants that vary in size (2mm – 8mm).
- Reddish brown in colour, with a black abdomen.
- Identification is difficult and requires evaluating a series of different sized workers.
- Nests that often have no visible entry holes like other ant nests.
- Young nests can be indistinct or start out as small piles of friable excavated soil. Older nests (3-6 months) will form raised mounds.
- A sting that can blister and form pustules at the sting site.



Red imported fire ants are reddish brown in colour.

Image courtesy of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program.



Red imported fire ants typically arrive at new locations with imported cargo.

## Arrival and spread

RIFA are native to South America, but have spread to the United States, China, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and Australia.

They typically arrive at new locations with cargo on ships, trucks or planes. Once established, RIFA can spread by colony budding where new colonies set up nearby, or by flights where newly mated queens fly off (up to 5kms) to start new nests.

## Importance of eradication

Although RIFA are native to South America, much of Australia is climatically suitable for these ants. Left unchecked they would infest populated and agricultural areas, spreading through the flight of queens and the regular movement of people and goods.

If established in Australia, the impacts of RIFA would surpass the combined damage done each year by our worst pests: feral cats, wild dogs, foxes, camels, rabbits and cane toads.

Successful eradication requires detecting all ant colonies as early as possible, destroying the colonies and preventing the spread to new areas through the movement of soil, mulch, plants and fodder.

## Reporting options

Report any unfamiliar ants immediately – even if unsure. Do not touch ants or disturb the nest as they may aggressively defend it. Take a clear photo if safe to do so, and contact the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development via:

### MyPestGuide:

- **App:** MyPestGuide™ Reporter
- **Website:** [mypestguide.agric.wa.gov.au](http://mypestguide.agric.wa.gov.au)

To the department's **Pest and Disease Information Service:**

- **Phone:** (08) 9368 3080
- **Email:** [padis@dpird.wa.gov.au](mailto:padis@dpird.wa.gov.au)

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### Important disclaimer

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