

“People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along?”

— Rodney King

A common question I get from beekeepers this time of year is, “What can I do to get rid of ants?” Sometimes the question is appended with, “... in my feeders” but often not. My typical response is, “Are they a problem?” to which the reply usually is, “I just don’t like them.”

Why do people hate ants? I’m not talking about ants in your kitchen cabinets. What we beekeepers face are ants “in the wild”, where they belong. Are they causing disease issues for our colonies? Are they eating significant amounts of resources intended for the bees? Are they interfering with our inspections and colony management? At my place the answer to all of those questions is “no.”

I acknowledge that all beekeeping is local and that I live in a magical place with few of the problems that others have. So I reviewed the best available literature to discover what the leading apiculture authorities have to say about ants.

Our classic bee school textbook, [First Lessons in Beekeeping](#) by Dr Keith Delaplane at the University of Georgia, says: “Fortunately for us in North America, ants fall into the category of nuisance more than pest. There are a number of ant species that nest in the peripheral parts of hives, such as the space between the inner and outer covers. Even though they are conspicuous, they rarely prey upon live honey bees or their brood. If you have problems with ants, you can fashion a hive stand that creates a moat of water or oil to create an impassable ant barrier.”¹

The Mid-Atlantic Apiculture Research and Extension Consortium (MAAREC) has similar advice: “Ants are not usually serious pests in



Like Peter Rabbit straying into Mr. McGregor's garden, this ant is violating my beekeeping domain. What should I do? Kill it and every last one of its kin, then hang its corpse from a nearby tree as a warning to others?

honey bee colonies. Occasionally, however, certain species may enter colonies to search for food or establish nesting sites. Ants are typically found between the inner and outer covers of the hive and in pollen traps. Although ants seldom disturb the bees, they can be a nuisance to the beekeeper.”²

Drs. Diana Sammataro and Alphonse Avitabile provide a little bit more ammunition in the campaign against ants, but with an important qualifier: “While not a problem in temperate climates, in the subtropical areas ants (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) are a serious pest, and hives have to be placed on top of greased posts or oiled cans to keep out marauding ants.”³

Finally, my ultimate go-to source, [The Hive and the Honey Bee](#), says: “Ants like the fire ants, carpenter ants, pharaoh ants and especially tropical ants like army ants may occasionally be serious pests. They steal honey, bee brood or live in the colony where bees can’t remove them. Chemical control of ants can be hazardous as the ants may track the insecticide intended for the pest into and onto comb and hive parts. Where the ants are a problem, hive stands with ant guards -- barriers of oil or

¹ Keith S. Delaplane, [First Lessons in Beekeeping](#), Dadant & Sons, Hamilton, Illinois, 2007, p. 138.

² Mid-Atlantic Apiculture Research and Extension Consortium (MAAREC), [A Field Guide to Honey Bees](#)

[and Their Maladies](#), The Pennsylvania State University, 2011, p. 74.

³ Dianna Sammataro and Alphonse Avitabile, [The Beekeeper’s Handbook, Fifth Edition](#), Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2021, pp. 270-271.

grease -- can be effective as long as the barrier remains intact.”⁴

If you are an ant-hater who is focused on the qualified comments above that go into the negative column, let me highlight the facts that are on the positive side:

1. in North America, ants fall into the category of nuisance more than pest
2. they rarely prey upon live honey bees or their brood
3. ants are not usually serious pests in honey bee colonies
4. ants seldom disturb the bees
5. not a problem in temperate climates

In light of all that, I stand by my general advice: unless they are directly causing problems, leave the ants alone. If they are eating a little sugar syrup, good for them! Ants are tiny and don't eat much. It is far more likely that they are eating things like Small Hive Beetle eggs on the inner cover. They also act as clean-up crew and remove all sorts of undesirable flotsam, including the carcasses of dead bees. Perhaps we should be encouraging them instead of keeping them out!

But if you are a subtropical or tropical beekeeper and encounter genuinely serious ant issues, the advice offered by MAAREC seems prudent: “To minimize ant problems, maintain strong colonies and keep bottom boards raised off the ground. Also, remove brush, rotten wood, grass, and weeds from around the colonies. If ants are a persistent problem, place single colonies on stands with the legs in containers of oil or coated with a sticky barrier. Allowing the bees access to the space between the inner and outer covers may reduce ant problems between the covers. Sometimes moving the colony a short distance or placing colonies in the sun rather than the shade will alleviate ant problems.”⁵

I also suggest that if it is your property, not just your bee hives, that have genuine ant issues such as aggressive fire ants, addressing



I often see more earwigs than ants on my inner covers. Why isn't there an outcry calling for their eradication? Could it be because few beekeepers know the name of this insect?

the problem at its source should be more effective than trying to mitigate one symptom, e.g., ants in the hive. Reputable advice is available from NC Cooperative Extension. For example, see

- “A Guide to House-Invading Ants and Their Control” (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/a-guide-to-house-invading-ants-and-their-control/>)
- “Red Imported Fire Ant” (<https://entomology.ces.ncsu.edu/red-imported-fire-ant/>)
- “Biology and Control of Carpenter Ants” (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/biology-and-control-of-carpenter-ants/>)

Beekeeping is often an outlet for nature study. Nature takes many fascinating forms, including that of ants. Rather than cursing and eradicating them, let's study and appreciate them, as long as they don't cross the line from nuisance to serious pest. If nothing else, your blood pressure should be much better for it.

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⁴ Joe M. Graham, ed., *The Hive and the Honey Bee*, Dadant & Sons, Hamilton, Illinois, 2015, p. 866.

⁵ MAAREC, p. 74.