



SUBMITTED ARTICLE

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Little Fire Ants in Kona

Although Little Fire Ants (LFA) have been present on the East side of the Big Island since 1999, the recent discovery of these stinging ants in Kona has sent the Hawaii Island Landscape Association (HILA) into high gear. Christopher McCullough of HILA quickly called around to gather others from the green industry to form the Stop Little Fire Coalition. The first meeting will be at 4:30 pm on Wednesday, Feb. 17th at the Kona CES conference room in Kainaliu.

LFA are serious pests that infest yards and agricultural fields, from ground level to the tops of trees, and they move into houses when their numbers are large. As their common name implies, LFA are small—about as long as a penny is thick—and they pack a powerful sting that burns for hours before turning into pustules that can itch for weeks. Outdoor pets and livestock are also at risk from LFA because the ants sting their eyes, resulting in blindness.

One property owner near the original East Hawaii infestation reports having to spray his yard and the perimeter of his house every two months just to keep ant numbers down so he can do yard work. How many ants are we talking about, you ask? One study looked at shallow core samples taken from a tropical fruit orchard floor in East Hawaii and estimated that there were more than 95 million ants per acre, not including the ants living in the trees.

Speaking of trees, LFA are easily dislodged from trees and plants when bumped, and they rain down in large numbers when you are pruning branches, harvesting fruit, or picking flowers. Some orchard workers in East Hawai'i have quit their jobs because of this. In the Galapagos Islands, when LFA populations are large, workers are prevented from harvesting coffee.

One of the challenges to controlling and eradicating LFA is the lack of registered techniques and pesticides to control ants in trees. Ant specialist Cas Vanderwoode of the Hawaii Department of Agriculture is working on rectifying both of these problems, but this may take some time.

So far, the Kona infestation spans eight known residences and one landscaping business. Very limited infestations on Kauai and Maui are almost eradicated. However, there are more than 50 East Hawaii infestations, and there could be more across the state. LFA are primarily transported to new sites in potted plants, plant materials, soil, and green waste, so it is important for everyone to monitor for these pests.

Always test for LFA when you purchase or move plants, and periodically test for LFA on your property. Be aware that Hawai'i has two types of stinging fire ants: the fairly widespread tropical fire ant (the uninvited picnic guests that infest many local parks) and LFA which are not widespread. To tell the difference, tropical fire ants are fairly big (1/8-1/4 inch long), brownish in color, and some of the workers have heads that look bigger than their bodies. LFA are very

small (1/16 inch) and rather difficult to see, orange-red in color, slow moving, and their heads and bodies are evenly proportioned.

To test for LFA, place peanut butter-coated chopsticks around your property or in plant materials for an hour to attract ants. Pick up the chopsticks (carefully, LFA are easily dislodged) and put them in a sealable plastic bag. Examine the ants on the peanut butter.

- Are they red-orange?
- Are they no longer than 1/16 inch (the thickness of a penny)?
- Are they slow-moving and do they fall off the chopstick easily when you tap it?

If you can answer YES to these questions, then you may have the little fire ant. Seal the plastic bag, write your name and phone number on the bag, and place it in the freezer overnight to kill the ants. Contact the State Pest Hotline at 643-PEST (643-7378), your local Hawai'i Department of Agriculture office or Invasive Species Committee.

Do not begin control of the ants until State Agriculture officials have been consulted. Products such as Siege® Pro and Amdro® Pro (both hydramethylnon), Extinguish® Plus (hydramethylnon and methoprene), Esteem® Ant Bait (pyriproxyfen), and Conserve™ Professional Fire Ant Bait (spinosad) have been successfully used to control LFA infestations, but eradication is extremely difficult and requires repeated applications over years.

More information on LFA can be found at <http://hawaii.gov/hdoa/pi/ppc/npa-1/npa99-02-lfireant.pdf>

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