

## Odorous House Ants

(*Tapinoma sessile*)



*Worker, about 1/8 inch*



*Tending aphids for honeydew (VA)*



*Crowding onto a food source*

**Identification** – The odorous house ant is the most common ant in Northern Virginia homes. It's very small, about 1/8 inch, and dark brown to black, and it travels in trails along counters, baseboards, door frames and siding. Crush one and it smells like rotten coconut, which is how it got the name. Of the three ants we see most, the pavement ant is about the same size but rarely comes inside, and the Pennsylvania carpenter ant is much bigger, 1/4 to 1/2 inch.

**Why they're a problem** – They don't bite, sting or damage the house, but they get into sugary food and pet food, and once they find a kitchen they keep coming. What you see inside, whether it's 10, 20 or even 100 ants, is a tiny part of the colony. Tens of thousands are nesting in the ground outside, often in many nests per acre, and they forage hundreds of feet from home.

**What we find** – We usually find trails coming in at the back door, the kitchen, a basement bathroom or the garage door. They nest in mulch beds, under stones, in wood piles, compost and clutter, and sometimes in walls. In townhouses and condos, the nest may be at the other end of the building or in the neighbor's yard. They usually start in April or May, sometimes with a sudden "ant explosion." Seeing a few ants on a warm winter day is normal; they get caught by the cold and disappear on their own.

**What works – Treat outside, at the source.** Treatments or baiting indoors alone won't solve it; the outside nest has to be eliminated. We treat the nests, the outside trails and the foundation, which takes care of the colony in about a week to 10 days, with only minimal treatment inside to kill the foragers. Sealing cracks won't keep them out: they come in through tiny gaps around windows, doors, siding and even below-grade foundation walls, and it's impossible to seal a home that tight. Treating too early in spring doesn't work well, because a late cold snap drives the ants deep into the soil.

**What you can do** – Wipe trails inside with window cleaner or anything with ammonia. It erases their scent trail and holds them off while the outside treatment works. **Don't bait or spray inside**, because bait inside draws them in more, and sprays scatter them so they pop up elsewhere. If you use a store-bought ant bait, put it *outside*, right where the trail goes into the ground. Store-bought bait is so strong that small ants die before getting it back to the queen. Keep food and pet food put away, and keep the foundation clear of debris and clutter.

**When to call Dynamic** – Give us a call if ants are trailing inside every day, if they keep coming back, or if you see winged ants indoors. And if you're not sure whether it's an odorous house ant, a pavement ant or a carpenter ant, send us a photo and we'll identify it for you.