

Purchasing Plants from Local Nurseries on O‘ahu by Brown Cannon

At present, there is no credible evidence that any nursery on O‘ahu can **guarantee** plants or mulch are completely free of little fire ants (LFA) or coconut rhinoceros beetle (CRB) larvae and eggs. Given how widespread CRB is on the island and the growing number of fire ant outbreaks, such a guarantee would be nearly impossible to uphold.

That said, many of us still want to support local nurseries. The question is: **how do we protect ourselves and our gardens from these invasive pests?**

Fire Ants (LFA)

Prevention tips when purchasing plants:

- Research online to see if the nursery you’re buying from has had complaints or reports of fire ants.
- Inspect each plant carefully for ant activity before purchase.
- Look closely at the base of the plant, in the potting soil, and around the roots, where ants often nest.
- Check the undersides of leaves, stems, and buds, as fire ants often forage in hidden spots.
- Be alert for **tiny reddish ants about 1/16 inch (1.5 mm) long** — the size and color of little fire ants.

Recommendation: If you see any sign of ant activity, **do not purchase the plant.**

Coconut Rhinoceros Beetles (CRB)

Because CRB is now established across O‘ahu, you should assume some risk exists with soil and potted plants. Female beetles may lay eggs in the soil, and eggs are extremely difficult to detect.

Steps to reduce risk when bringing plants home:

1. **Check the nursery’s record:** Look online for reports of CRB activity. Chances are, it’s present.
2. **Remove the plant from its pot immediately** upon getting it home. Place the nursery soil into a **sealed black trash bag**.
 - If you find larvae, destroy them immediately.
3. **Wash the roots** gently with water to remove any remaining soil.

4. **Re-pot the plant** using clean potting soil imported from the mainland or from a trusted source.
 5. **Treat the nursery soil:**
 - Spread it in a thin layer inside the sealed black bag.
 - Place the bag on concrete in **direct sunlight for at least 3 days**.
 - Solar heating can raise soil temperatures high enough to kill eggs and larvae.
 - Research and USDA guidance suggest CRB eggs and larvae are killed at **50–55 °C (122–131 °F)** for several hours.
 - Composting protocols in Hawai'i recommend piles reach **55 °C (131 °F) for 3 or more days** to ensure mortality.
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Bottom Line

While you can't eliminate all risk, you *can* significantly reduce it by carefully inspecting plants for fire ants, avoiding any with visible ant activity, and treating nursery soil to kill potential CRB eggs or larvae before adding plants to your garden.

Also, check out this article on how to survey for fire ants (LFA).

<https://littlefireants.com/wp-content/uploads/20250516-How-to-Survey-Handout-min.pdf>

Your Guide to HOW TO SURVEY for Little Fire Ants



Why Survey

Little Fire Ants (LFA) are so tiny they can go undetected on your property until their numbers are well established. It is important to do a survey when:



Determining if LFA are present



Delimiting the extent of an infestation



Bringing in new plants/materials



Assessing if a treatment regimen is working

The earlier you detect LFA, the easier it will be to treat!

Survey Tips

- LFA like **shady, moist places**. Always place sticks out of the sun.
- Best time to do a survey is in the **early morning** or **late afternoon** when LFA are most active.
- It's important to **submit your ants** to our lab for identification when you suspect you have LFA. There are several other species of small, red ants that look like LFA. You don't want to invest time and money treating until you are 100% certain.

How to Survey



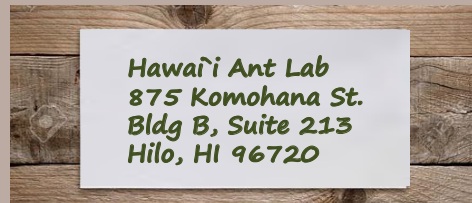
- 1 **Smear** a very thin layer of creamy peanut butter on chopsticks, popsicle sticks, or coffee stirrers.



- 2 **Place** peanut butter sticks in shady places on the ground and in trees every 10-15ft around your yard.



- 3 **Check** the sticks for ants after one hour. If you see small, orange ants on the stick (like the image above), place them in a sealed plastic bag and freeze them overnight to kill the ants.



- 4 **Mail** or bring ant samples to our office for identification. If you want to save on postage, you can also shake the ants off the stick into the bag. Please don't forget to include your contact info!