
School Pest Solutions



Carpenter Ants

Ants are often considered pests in Maine schools because they are unwelcome visitors inside buildings. Since most ants do not pose a serious threat to human health or property a common sense approach to managing them should be taken. Carpenter ants are a common outdoor pest in Maine.

It is usually not advisable or effective to apply pesticides to floors or baseboards indoors or as a perimeter treatment outdoors.

Biology

Ants are social creatures, sometimes making unbelievably large colonies. Some ants build nests in soil, either in the open, producing characteristic mounds; or under objects, such as stones, sidewalks, or slab construction. Other ants nest in buildings behind moldings, baseboards, under countertops, and in similar spaces. Yet other ants nest in decaying or moisture-damaged wood.



Carpenter ants are in the genus *Camponotus*, and eight species live in the Northeast. They earn their name from living in wood and creating smooth-walled tunnels and galleries. *Camponotus pennsylvanicus* is the familiar black carpenter ant often seen on school grounds.

Identification

All carpenter ants have a characteristic arch-shaped thorax, visible in the picture above. They are easily identified by their large size and black color. A colony can have different sizes of workers, ranging from 1/4 inch to 5/8 inch in length. The queen is slightly larger than the major workers and has a much smaller head and larger abdomen.

Carpenter ant damage is different from termite damage in that:

- The ant tunnels across the wood's grain, whereas termite tunnels always follow the wood's grain;
- Ant tunnels are clean, termite tunnels are covered with mud; and
- Carpenter ants often leave behind piles of frass, or sawdust, outside of their holes. The frass may contain pieces of wood and fragments of dead insects.



Retaining wall with tell-tale piles of frass.

Ant-Caused Damage

Carpenter ants are among the top pest ant groups in the United States. Even though they cause damage to structures through their nesting behavior, carpenter ant damage rarely compromises the structural integrity of a building. Carpenter ants do cause damage to utility poles and urban shade trees. Carpenter ant excavation not only weakens infested trees, but also leads to infestations by other pests and pathogens. Foraging ants or swarmers are a nuisance when they appear inside homes.

Monitoring for Carpenter Ants

Carpenter ants are often encountered in trees, stumps, and rotting logs outdoors but will come into schools buildings in search of food, water and nesting sites.

- Inspect trees and stumps near buildings for carpenter ant activity. This is most effective when done at night, when the ants are most active.
- Infested stumps and trees located near building should be removed.
- When nests do occur in buildings they are usually in association with moisture problems such as roof or plumbing leaks. Inspect attics, window sills and frames, porches, around sinks and dishwashers, foundations sills, to detect and repair leaks or condensation problems. Small piles of wood particles and/or dead ants found near any of these areas are an indication of carpenter ant nesting activity.
- The key to eliminating carpenter ants is to locate and remove (or treat) the nest. This is usually a job for a professional exterminator.

Management and Prevention

Identification is the first step in ant management, as it is with all other pests. Knowing what species of ant is present is important to determine the nesting site, food preference, and the best method of control. If the species cannot be determined from available resources, contact an expert for identification. Exclusion, sanitation, and physical removal are crucial in preventing and reducing ant infestations in school buildings.

- Seal cracks and spaces along the buildings' exterior that allow ants to enter.
- Cut back plants around the outside of buildings so they do not come in contact with structures.
- Store food, including candy, snacks, and pet food used in classrooms, in insect-proof containers made of plastic, metal, or glass with tight-fitting covers.
- Take garbage out regularly in closed plastic bags; vacuum and sweep regularly to remove food. Clean all kitchen surfaces regularly; wash dishes, pans, and utensils soon after they are used; rinse recyclable containers before storage.
- Vacuum winged ants and small numbers of workers that are found inside. After collecting ants in this way, vacuum up some cornstarch in order to suffocate the ants in the bag.
- Keep screens, weather stripping, and door sweeps in good repair. Keep gutters clean.

Chemical Control

If nonchemical methods alone are ineffective, or only partially effective, then integrating a pesticide into your management program may be warranted. Anyone making pesticide applications on school property must be licensed by the Board of Pesticides Control. See "Standards for Pesticide Applications and Public Notifications in Schools". **This includes bait traps and sprays.**

Spraying for ants in or around the perimeter of a school is not suggested. This is usually very ineffective.

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Much of the information on this page was borrowed from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Carpenter Ants Fact Sheet.

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