FIRE ANTS IN THE SOUTH

SPEECH FOR

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Hello everyone. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “An ant on the move does more than a dozing ox.” Apparently, the fire ant does even more! The red imported fire ant, also known as RIFA, first came to the United States in the 1930’s aboard a cargo ship that landed in the port city of Mobile, Alabama. Since that time generations ago, this little pest has shown us just how industrious it is-and how it’s ability to form a cohesive, intense and focused community has managed to procreate and spread to the point that now it is believed that the fire ant can be found in about one third of the United States…. the **southern** third!! From Florida to California and every place in between, fire ants can be found, and as a testimony to their industrious natures, we’re here today to speak about them and not those “dozing oxen!”

Motivational speaker Jim Rohn cites the habits and traits of the ant in something he refers to as “The Ant Philosophy.” Although he doesn’t refer specifically to the fire ant when he describes their habits, we can get a glimpse at the tenacity and fortitude of these tiny focused creatures. Rohn cites the following three traits in his treatise. He teaches us:

1. “They never quit.” Their path is clear. If an ant is headed somewhere, it gets there, and no matter the route, their determination is noteworthy.
2. “They think winter all summer.” They make sure they have what they need in any event. They are supplied and ready to survive crises.
3. “They think summer all winter.” Ants are survivors. Apparently they know nothing lasts forever and they tough out even the worst conditions to be able to roam and forage and bite for another day.

The red fire ant seems to take these points seriously, and once I share some data about these little creatures, I think you’ll see what I mean. Although there are about 700 species of ants, the fire ant is considered one of the most dangerous. According to the National Pest Management Association, extreme caution should be used if one encounters the red fire ant, or should I say a swarm of them. They tend to thrive in landscaped areas or near structural foundations. A single colony may contain up to 250,000 ants. They attack when they’re attacked. Approach an anthill and the swarm might possibly envelope your feet and legs in a matter of moments, and you will become the special of the day at the “ant buffet.” Fire ants tend to nest in moist soil, near riverbanks, watered lawns, the shoulders of the local highway, and the nest will most probably be hidden from view, constructed under bricks or logs or stones. Alternatively, mounds may be formed and can be as big as 15 inches in diameter and as deep as 5 feet!! Although the colony can be founded by one very industrious (and fertile) queen ant, groups of queens may also be found within the colony. The main purpose of the queen is for reproduction, and the fire ant queen can live for up to six or seven years and produce more than 3500 eggs in a single day. If you’ve done the calculations, a single queen ant has the ability to produce about 8 million eggs in her lifetime. Her male drone? Not so lucky. He mates with the queen and dies within 4-5 days. The usual diet for the fire ant consists of young plants, seeds, and the occasional cricket. Of course they have also been known to have the capability to attack small animals and can even kill them. Talk about teamwork! Whereas other ants bite, the fire ant bites and then stings. People can be highly allergic to their venom and the stings can be fatal if not treated properly.

Science and technology are continually looking for ways to deal with this pest, and up to know, millions of dollars have been spent combating the fire ant, especially in the southern parts of the US. About a decade ago, CNN reported that areas like Durant, Oklahoma and Hope, Arkansas tried to literally “fight fire ants with fire ants” as they released some of the species that had been infected with a microorganism to help combat the infestation. There is a pathogen known as T. solenopsae that is used to infect ant colonies and weaken them. The queen ant gets weaker and weaker as the worker ants transfer the poison through food exchange. As she becomes more and more incapacitated and loses weight, fewer eggs are produced and the colony diminishes.

Several years ago, a study was done on the damage created by fire ants in South Carolina. According to a white paper issued by Clemson University, in 1987, 500,000 cases of stings were reported that required medical attention costing an estimated $1.8 million. Stings can lead to secondary infections and permanent scarring. Pastures and farm equipment have been ruined by infestations, livestock and poultry have been killed, and millions of dollars annually have been spent on RIFA control. And that was twenty-five years ago! As recently as May 2012, KTHV of Little Rock, Arkansas, reported that according to the USDA, fire ants occupy more than 300 million acres of land in 12 southern states!

They’re small but they create a tremendous nuisance. By all accounts, the way to deal with them is to avoid them. The theory is “don’t bother them and they won’t bother you,” but that’s not the solution. If you find yourself, or your leg, staring down the thorax of a fire ant or a few thousand, seek the advice and service of a professional. There is too much at stake-property damage, animal fatalities, and possibly even serious health issues for you or the person who tries to deal with them independently. Take care, exercise caution, and seek the assistance of a seasoned pest control pro.

Thank you all!