

Ant(sy) Summer Fun

Ants can be a great source of entertainment and learning. They are everywhere and easy to watch with much of the action happening on the ground right in front of us. Ants are social insects and live in colonies. Adopting a colony lets you have a pet without the long-term commitment or allergies! Or, just for fun, try ant farming. Here's an ant friendly suggestion.

No Fuss, No Muss Ant Farm

Leave the ants where they are and visit daily to 'tend' to the ants. Find a nearby anthill to adopt as your farm. Where to look? Pavement ants live under pavement and leave a telltale pile of dirt at the entrance. Some ants, in open areas, build a nest in a clump of grass, and others build a mound from forest debris, especially pine needles. Mark your farm with a stick or rock so you can find it again. Choose black ants, avoid red ants which can sting. Visit your farm regularly and study how the ants move about. Offer small amounts of different foods, fruit, bread, flowers, seeds, dead bugs. Keep a journal to record the ant antics on your farm.

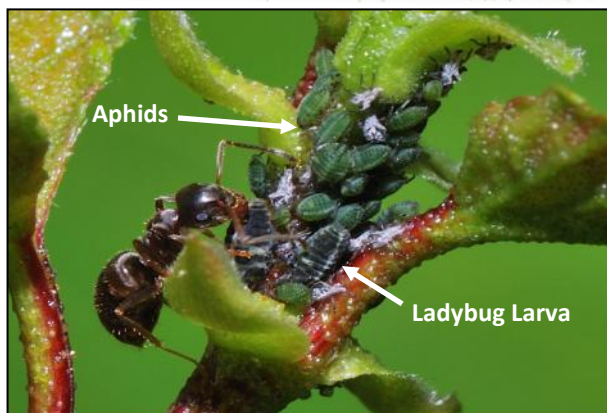
- ◆ Spot an ant "house cleaning", carrying debris out of the hill/nest.
- ◆ How many ants go in or out of their nest in 1 minute?
- ◆ Watch an ant carrying an insect, plant material, or another ant.
- ◆ Spot an ant carrying something larger than itself. (Ants can carry 20x their body weight)
- ◆ Watch two ants working together to move something.
- ◆ Ants leave a scent trail to find their way back to good food. Spot an ant following a trail. (Hint — ants 'sniff' with their antennae)
- ◆ Place a drop of honey 20—30 cm from an ant nest. How long does it take for an ant to find it? How soon do other ants follow the "trail" to the honey? How long before the honey is gone?
- ◆ Watch for ants weather-proofing their nest, covering the openings with pine needles or small stones. (Check the weather forecast for rain!)
- ◆ Follow one ant as it heads out foraging.
- ◆ Watch ants meeting and greeting each other with antennae touching.



Pavement Ant Nest



Ant Hill



An ant is protecting its 'herd' from hungry ladybug larvae.

True Ant Farm— Ants can be farmers. Some species grow edible fungus inside their nests while others look after tiny 'livestock'. The latter live close to colonies of aphids, tiny insects that suck the nutritious juices from plants. The ants protect the aphids from predators. In exchange for protection, the aphids give the ants honeydew, a nourishing, sugary liquid. An ant 'milks' the aphid by gently tapping it with its antennae or front leg. When the aphid feels the tapping, it secretes (pees) honeydew for the ant to collect. The ant moves from aphid to aphid, gathering 'pay for protection' and takes it home to the colony. This 'I help you, you help me' relationship is called symbiosis.

Look for aphids, tiny green or black insects, clustered on the tender new plant growth. See if you can find tiny ant farmers at work!

Hot Rock Heating — Garden ants build nests underground beneath a heat-absorbing object, often a rock. During the day, they bring their eggs and pupae up under the warm rock to help them develop faster. A fast-growing colony has advantages in the competitive world of ants. The radiant heat from the rock also allows the ants to get an early start in the spring and keep going longer into the fall. Ants have used 'radiators' for heat long before people thought to.

Carefully turn and replace rocks until you find a nest. Watch the ants take care to save every egg, pupae, and each other. Time the activity to see how long it takes. Be respectful and give the ants a little space while watching — Ants will defend their home and they can bite. Remember to gently replace their rock just the way you found it.