

# Tropical fire ant

Prohibited invasive species

Look. Report. Protect. 13 25 23



Tropical fire ants are 2–5 mm long



Tropical fire ants on a 5 cent coin



Tropical fire ants eating kabana



Tropical fire ants

Tropical fire ants get their name from their powerful sting, which results in a painful burning sensation.

While the tropical fire ant species is related to the red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*), and share similar traits and behaviours, they are a little smaller and are managed and treated differently.

Tropical fire ants also protect and ‘farm’ sap-sucking insects such as scales, mealybugs and aphids, increasing their populations on native plants, resulting in decreased plant health or premature plant death.

They protect honey dew-producing insects from parasites and predators, allowing the insects to thrive, which reduces plant health and productivity.

Despite being small, Tropical fire ants are highly aggressive and attack any intruder that disturbs its nest.

They can inflict painful stings, which can result in red itchy bumps that can last for days, and in some cases can lead to an allergic reaction.

Tropical fire ants can form super colonies, displacing native ants, insects and animals and have the potential to destroy crops.

Tropical fire ants prefer food with high protein content and can kill hatchling turtles, eat the eggs of birds, reptiles and amphibians and injure nestling seabirds.

They are also attracted to many human foods rich in carbohydrates and fats.



Queensland  
Government

## Legal requirements

Tropical fire ants are prohibited invasive species under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. Prohibited species must be reported immediately to Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical measures to minimise the biosecurity risks associated with tropical fire ants under their control.

## Description

Adults have a shiny brown-orange body and are around 2–5 mm in length. Workers come in a variety of sizes, from tiny minors to larger majors with a big square head.

They can be confused with red imported fire ants which have a coppery brown head and body and darker abdomen.

## Methods of spread

Tropical fire ants can be easily moved in a variety of ways if not checked and treated before moving between locations, including between states or territories.

They can be moved in items such as timber pallets, equipment, shipping containers, caravans, trailers, mobile homes, boats and yachts.

## Habitat and distribution

Tropical fire ants like to nest in soil that has been disturbed, mostly in sunny places. Their nest looks like a mound of soil, with several entrance holes with dirt spread widely around.

Mature nests have up to 100 000 ants and multiple queens.

They usually forage within 15 m of the nest but foraging can occur up to 50 m from the nest. This species is also known to utilise underground tunnels that can extend for more than 20 m from the main nesting chamber.

A new queen can fly up to 2 km from the original nest. These flights occur during warmer months (September to May).

Tropical fire ants were found at the Port of Brisbane in June 2019. In response, the Australian Government, with support from Biosecurity Queensland, has implemented a control program to destroy the infestation.

Tropical fire ants were previously detected in south east Queensland in 2002, and successfully eradicated.

They are established in most parts of Africa, South East Asia, the Pacific region, and parts of northern Australia.

In Australia, they are established at Ashmore Reef, Christmas Island, and the Northern Territory. They have also been found in areas of Western Australia.

## Surveillance

We use luring and visual surveillance in areas suited to the ants, looking for nests or foraging ants.

Lures consist of syrup or sausage in small jars placed on the ground approximately 5 m apart, paired or alternating between the two attractants.

Lures are placed and collected after one hour, allowing enough time for the ants to be attracted to the lures.

Trained officers perform a visual inspection to look for and sample any suspect ants. Ants are identified under a compound microscope by an entomologist.

## Prevention and early detection

Similar to other invasive ants, populations of tropical fire ants can increase rapidly. You can do your part to stop their spread. Check machinery, plant and equipment and cargo before you move it.

If you think you have seen tropical fire ants, report it immediately to Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23 or scan the QR code to access our reporting web page.

## More information

Contact Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23 or visit [biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://biosecurity.qld.gov.au).



Tropical fire ant (*Solenopsis geminata*)



Red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*)

This fact sheet is developed with funding support from the Land Protection Fund.

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