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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

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Thursday, July 25, 1935
U. S. Department of Agriculture

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Subject: "HOUSE ANTS." Information from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, United States Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Here's an idea just in on the morning mail. A listener who has heard some of the occasional chats we've had on household insects suggests that we organize a regular "bug-of-the-week club" -- that is, set aside one day a week for talking over insects that trouble housewives and the best ways of getting rid of them. Votes by mail might decide which insect has the honor each week, says this lady.

What do you think of that idea?

Our listener adds that she personally would like to hear about ants this week -- house ants. She says both her kitchen and pantry are over-run with the little red variety and she wants to know the most effective way of getting rid of them. So, I guess the house ant wins the election this week. Since plenty of other people have written for this information, we'll take time off to discuss it this very day.

You may be interested to know that many of our house ants are emigrants, not natives, of these United States. They're mostly foreigners from the Tropics who came to these shores as stowaways on ships and have prospered here by living off their fellow men. Their ancestors were household ants of hot countries -- some natives of the Old World, others from South America. No doubt these travelers were the more adventurous members of the old-country colonies who found their way on trading vessels and thus crossed the ocean. Once ashore they were wise enough to adjust themselves to their new surroundings. So they became indoor insects, settling in buildings that offered them warmth, food, and shelter. That's why we often find their descendants in kitchens and pantries, in greenhouses, and also in mills and bakeries.

For example, take that common little red house ant -- the one mentioned in our friend's letter, which also goes by the name of Pharoah's ant. The entomologists say that it was once a soil ant of the Old-World Tropics, but that in this country, it spends its entire life in heated buildings. You see how life has gone for the red ant -- from babe in the woods to penthouse dweller, you might say, or from earth hut to steam-heated palace.

Another one of our house-dwelling ants hails from Africa, still another from India. Then, five species have migrated here from South America, among them one that is not only a serious house pest but also a bad field pest -- the Argentine ant. Only one of our regular house ants belongs to this country and

climate. That's the little "thief ant" which not only steals from human beings but also from other ants. You've probably seen this ant often -- it's smaller and more yellowish than the red ant. Counting all species, the regular and the occasional house dwellers, you may find any one of 24 kinds of ants in your home. And most of them have interesting histories. Their ancestors may have come from India's coral strand, or the road to Mandalay, or ancient Peruvian forests. But any one of them will be happy to share not only your home but your meals. And most of them will enjoy living on the fat of the land, so to speak -- that is, on meat fat, salad oil or cooked animal food generally. They also love sweets -- sugar, sirup, cake, candy and so on. Once the house detective of the ant colony discovers a supply of accessible food, he broadcasts the news to his colony. I don't say that ants do their broadcasting by radio exactly, but they get the news abroad almost as fast as if they did. In an incredibly short time, the relatives by the hundred are on the scene hurrying for a free meal. And they're most persistent about it. That's why they are so annoying to us housekeepers. Generally speaking, ants aren't so destructive -- certainly they don't do nearly the costly damage that some other house pests do, but they're unpleasant and annoying, and once in your home get into everything available. The workers come out from their nests in the wall, woodwork, floor, even furniture sometimes, and set up a steady line of march from home to commissary, you might say. Once that bread-line starts, you'll find difficulty in stopping it as long as your kitchen or pantry offers a free food supply.

By the way, that last phrase is your best cue to control and prevention. Ants won't be attracted to your premises, and they won't stay if they come by accident, if no food is available there. If you keep all food either in the refrigerator, or in insect-proof tin or glass containers, and if you keep your kitchen and pantry very clean -- no forgotten spilled grease anywhere, no crumbs, nor sugar in the cracks and corners, you won't have much ant trouble.

But if you want to rout out ants already firmly established, you can sometimes do it quickly by destroying the nest, or by using a poison or repellent. Sometimes you can trace the workers back to the spot where they disappear and locate the nest. Then you can fill an oil can or syringe with kerosene or gasoline and shoot this substance into the opening, thus destroying the nest. But this method is a fire risk. If you use it, you have to take great care to see that no flame is present.

For ants that like sweets, you can prepare a poisoned sirup. The idea here is that the ants will carry this back to their nests and eventually the whole colony will be wiped out. You can dissolve 4 ounces of sugar in a quart of water, and add one-half ounce of tartar emetic. Soak a sponge in this and set it on the ants' runway. For ants that like fat, you can work small quantities of tartar emetic into grease or pieces of bacon rind. But any poisoned bait is dangerous around a house where children or pets might get hold of it. After all, the safest, though not always the quickest, way to control ants is to starve them out.

If you want information on dealing with house ants, you can write to the Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., and ask for the bulletin on the subject. The name of the bulletin is just "House Ants." If you want to order by number, ask for Farmers' Bulletin No. 740. This publication is free as long as the supply lasts.

