



NATIONAL

Fire Ant Eradication

PROGRAM

Potted plant fact-check

FACT: Fire ants live in potted plants

Potted plants make an ideal home for fire ants and can easily spread fire ants from one place to another when moved. Potting mix and artificial media are loose and easy for fire ants to build a nest in. Potted plants get watered often, making a perfect, moist environment for fire ants to thrive. We have discovered fire ant infestations living in potted plants that were established colonies with eggs and young ants.

FACT: Fire ants can live in soil AND artificial potting media

Fire ants can make a home in virtually anything, including different types of common potting mix and artificial media. Fire ants do not need soil to build a nest.

FACT: Regular watering does not prevent fire ants from thriving in potted plants

Regular watering is one of the reasons fire ants find potted plants such a great place to live. These ants are from the Pantanal region of South America, the world's largest tropical wetland. There is nothing fire ants love more than a bit of water to keep their home nice and moist.

FACT: Evidence shows us that fire ants can be moved long distances in potted plants

We have found fire ant infested pot plants at six different nurseries in South East Queensland. Three of those nurseries were trading interstate. Fire ant nests have also been found on another 33 nursery properties over the course of the eradication program; one nursery being infested on eight separate occasions by flight of newly mated queens (genetic analysis showed that these were new infestations and not survivors of treatment). There have also been two confirmed instances in Australia where fire ants were transported long distances inside a potted plant, the furthest of which was over 1700 km from Brisbane to Melbourne. In addition, Federal Quarantine inspectors have intercepted at our international border 17 species of exotic invasive ants, including fire ants, in pot plants being imported from overseas.

FACT: A fire ant infestation cannot always be detected by handling or disturbing the infested potted plant

When a newly mated queen first enters a potted plant, she will make a chamber in the potting mixture, where she will stay for 21 days to lay her first batch of eggs. During this time, she will not leave the chamber, no matter how much the potted plant is disturbed, and there will be no visible signs that the potted plant is infested.



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FACT: Visual checks are not an effective tool to determine if a property or potted plant is infested with fire ants

Fire ants can be hidden underground for a long time, with little or no visual evidence that they are there. Some reasons for this are: newly mated queens will stay underground for the first 21 days while they lay their first eggs, new nests may not appear on the surface for the first 4-5 months, and fire ants generally do not build surface mounds in the hot summer months.

FACT: Fire ant infested potted plants are a high risk to our program

The movement of any material that can carry fire ants, including potted plants, is one of the highest risks to our program and the fire ant eradication efforts. There is evidence proving that potted plants can carry fire ants and transport nests internationally and domestically over long distances. We have limited compliance resources and cannot check every movement of potted plants that takes place, and visual inspection cannot be relied on alone. The fire ant biosecurity zones and movement controls in Queensland's Biosecurity Regulation 2016 prevent most high-risk movements; however, it only takes a single mated queen to start a new colony. Genetic analysis tells us that the entire remaining South East Queensland infestation of 600,000 ha is the result of a single mated queen.

FACT: Overseas evidence of moving fire ants in potted plants is still relevant to Australia

Information from the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is that many nurseries in the US use similar containerised methods and mixes to those in Australia. They confirm that fire ants have been found in such stock and are routinely intercepted during State border quarantine inspections.

FACT: CSIRO endorsed our control measures for managing potted plants

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) recently completed an independent review and found chemical treatment the most effective and versatile control measure for treating fire ants. They also noted that visual inspection has reduced value as a standalone mitigation measure, since mated female alates can infest nursery stock during their breeding flight.