

County pushes safe suppression of pests in yard and household

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Plants thrive on the rain. Bugs thrive on the plants. Bigger creatures thrive on the bugs.

So it is no surprise that there are a lot of pests out there right now, and more are on the way.

In the back yard, snails are everywhere. Ants will be, too.

"If you like bees and wasps, you ought to see a lot," said Chris Conlan, senior vector ecologist with the county Department of Environmental Health.

With abundant food sources, there is a greater potential for more offspring to survive, meaning bigger populations, Conlan said.

But don't reach for the pesticide just yet. There are plenty of alternatives. Ones that won't hurt the kids or dog, or be carried into the ocean.

Some of those methods were demonstrated yesterday in a Point Loma yard by county experts who have begun a program called Healthy Garden – Healthy Home. The program's focus is educating people about how to protect their families, pets and the environment from toxic pesticides.

"Pesticides may kill creepy bugs and pests, but at a serious cost to the environment," said county Supervisor Greg Cox.

"Even if you can't see the coastline from your back yard, the garden pesticide that you use is washing out to the beaches," Cox said.

Among the greatest offenders among household and garden pests are brown snails and Argentine ants.

Cheryl Wilen held a snail in her hand. She's an integrated pest management adviser for the University of California Extension.



FRED GREAVES

Snails will avoid crossing a copper band placed on a tree trunk, as demonstrated in a Point Loma yard yesterday by an integrated pest management adviser for University of California Extension.

"These are the little guys that cause so many problems in California," Wilen said.

Brought to the state in the 1850s to be farmed for escargot, European brown snails have infested crops, back yards and even freeway embankments – where the population at times makes for slippery roadways.

Wilen offered two nontoxic alternatives to snail bait: wrapping copper around the base of a tree to repel snails, and employing Decollate snails. Decollates are the small "killer" snails that eat the brown snail, without doing any harm to the garden.

The Decollates have been used in the United States for 150 years by growers, gardeners and, more recently, the state Department of Transportation.

Another pest that is not only annoying but painful is the red imported fire ant. Since the Brazilian ant arrived in the county in 1999, there have been eight infestations, said county entomologist David Kellum.

"They need about 20 inches of rain, so this is the perfect year for them," Kellum said. "The populations will only increase as the weather gets warmer."

Anyone suspecting a fire ant infestation should call the county's bee information line, (800) 200-2337.

Another ant, the Argentine ant, doesn't have a painful bite, but it is a nuisance as it marches in formation through homes and office buildings looking for any scrap of food.

"One ant can go through your house several times in one day," Kellum said.

He recommended using ant bait, which won't harm the environment because it's ingested by the ants after it is carried back to the nest.

Killing the ones you see marching in line won't fix the problem.

"If you're killing the foragers, you're only killing 10 percent of the ants," he said. Each nest is home to about 20,000.

Inside the house, use soapy water to kill the ants, and plug up entryways with caulk or petroleum jelly. Put away food and remove any infested potted plants.

It won't get better with dry weather. While it may slow down the snails, it's just another reason for the ants to invade homes – this time, in search of water.

Staff writer David E. Graham contributed to this report.