

ARTICLE #1

The Marin County Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with our school district, is working to reduce pesticide use on school grounds. This is the first in a series of articles about creating a healthier, safer school environment.

Invasion of the Snack Snatchers

It's fall, kids are back in school and so is the Argentine ant, our main nuisance ant in Marin County. Have you noticed any of these guest workers in classrooms recently? They come inside for a number of reasons. In the fall they are usually searching for food and water because outside, their primary food source is declining as winter approaches.

The favorite food of the Argentine ant is the "honeydew" excreted by aphids and a number of similar insects. When honeydew is scarce, ants search far and wide for any kind of food they can get their jaws on. And so you see the ant trails going to the half-empty soda can and gnawed chicken bones at the bottom of the garbage can, or the cupcake crumbs on a desk. Understanding why creatures invade our spaces can help us learn how better to prevent them. Preventing pest problems reduces the need for pesticides.

But what do you do when ants are swarming across the floor? First, remove the attractive items and clean up any food residues on classroom surfaces. You can wipe up the ant trail using a sponge and a spray bottle of soapy water. Just rinse the sponge and wash the ants down the drain. Try to find the ants' entry point and block it with a piece of tape. The hole can later be permanently sealed with caulk.

Classroom cleanliness can go a long way toward eliminating ant invasions. Keep food remains out of the classroom garbage, and store food out of the reach of ants. Using food for art or science projects and storing snacks in the classroom is an open invitation for not only ants, but also cockroaches, mice, and rats to move right in. If food items must be kept in the classroom, store them in sturdy plastic containers with snap-on, tightly fitting lids.

—Tanya Drlik, Marin Model School Integrated Pest Management Project Coordinator, Marin County Department of Agriculture

For more information on least-hazardous methods of handling pest problems, visit the Marin County Department of Agriculture web site at www.co.marin.ca.us and click on "Services," then "School IPM Program," then "Specifically for Parents and Teachers" and go to "IPM Fact Sheets."

Or contact

Bio-Integral Resource Center in Berkeley, 510-524-2567, email: birc@igc.org

or

Marin County Storm Water Pollution Prevention Program (for free fact sheets on various pests, including ants): 415-499-6528.