

Take a lesson from ants and take over the world

By Rick Maier

What a fantastic time of year in Middle Georgia – your choice of warm sun or cool shade, with flowers and blooms punctuating the lush green landscape, and longer days to allow more outdoor activities. All is wonderful...except those pesky little bugs. But insects aren't all bad, and ants in particular deserve a closer look.

We humans usually think of ourselves as the only sophisticated life form around, but ants also have a powerful influence on the world. While one ant may be pretty insignificant, their ability to work together is amazing and might even serve as a lesson for people.

Ants have existed, pretty much unchanged, since the days of the early dinosaurs. Even though it takes hundreds of thousands to equal a pound, all the ants weigh more than all the people on earth. Thousands of different kinds of ants live throughout the world, and chances are the first living creature you will find in the soil, on the ground or in a tree will be an ant.

Some ants live up to 20 years while others can carry up to 50 times their weight (equal to an adult human carrying a car on each shoulder). Some types can burrow 40 feet underground, while others herd and 'milk' insects just like we farm dairy cows. Harvester ants bite off the tip of seeds they store underground to keep them from sprouting. Working in large teams, army ants can kill a water buffalo.

One of our least favorite local critters – the fire ant - hitched a ride on a ship from South America that arrived in Mobile, AL in the 1920's. The prolific little pests have been migrating at a rate of five miles per year, displacing other ant societies and causing damage on farms in 10 Southern states.

Ants may help themselves to our food and sting us when we invade their space, but on the plus side, they eat a lot of insects (dead or alive, especially termites), aerate the soil and pollinate plants.

If ants have what humans would consider a fault, it's that they are not the least bit romantic. All the ants we normally see in nature are females. The queen only lays a male egg when she needs a "prince" for mating every few months. The queen and prince grow wings and fly high into the sky to mate. The male falls to earth dead and the queen goes on to start a new colony.

My interest in ants began last year with my son's ant farm – a project I highly recommend for parents to share with their kids. As soon as we dumped the little tube of ants into their new plastic village, they went right to work – without a lot of meetings or

calls to headquarters. The colony must have leaders, but they're hard to spot (and I could find no sign of lawyers, tax collectors or therapists).

Within hours the ants dug intricate tunnels and mounds in the sand-filled farm, creating chambers for pantries, bathrooms and cemeteries. Each had a certain task to perform - scout, worker, or janitor - and every individual performed her job non-stop and without deviation. Even when it looked as if their work was done, they continued making improvements.

Teamwork transforms a mob of tiny individual ants into a lean, mean, performance machine – it's as if the colony becomes a single body. In observing and reading about ants I try to avoid comparisons, but I wish humans were as universally diligent and had such a collective sense of purpose.

In all fairness, ants have existed about 49 million years longer than man, so maybe, with time and some evolutionary good fortune, we humans will improve our ability to work together in peace.

(Picture of two girls with sticks)

Despite the dangers, Madison (7) and Morgan Maier (5) can't resist provoking this colony of fire ants.