

IDENTIFYING THE RED IMPORTED FIRE ANT (*Solenopsis invicta*)

There are over 40 kinds of ants in Hawaii. The species most likely to be mistaken for red imported fire ants (RIFA) is the tropical fire ant (*Solenopsis geminata*), which is also called the “red ant” in Hawaii. Indeed, it is impossible to distinguish these two species by appearance alone without a microscope. However, a suite of characteristics (outlined below), including ant appearance, behavior, and nest-mound appearance, can help you identify RIFA. If you think you have RIFA, call the Hawaii Dept of Agriculture toll-free pest hotline: 643-PEST. (Photos courtesy of the Texas Imported Fire Ant Management Project and USDA.)

BODY SIZE AND COLOR:

RIFA are reddish-brown, with a shiny opaque black abdomen (the butt-end). Their size varies widely; ranging from 1/8” to 1/4 “ (or 3-6mm) long. *Tropical fire ants are similar in size and color to RIFA.*

HEAD SIZE:

RIFA colonies do not include large-headed individuals. RIFA heads are never larger than their abdomens (their butt end).

Tropical fire ant (and other) colonies include some individuals with large heads (heads wider than abdomens).



RIFA with typical head



Tropical fire ant with large head



BEHAVIOR:

RIFA ARE EASILY IDENTIFIED BY THEIR VERY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR. Unlike other ants, when a RIFA nest mound is disturbed, hundreds to thousands of RIFA swarm out over their mound (described as “boiling up out of the nest”) and rapidly climb and sting anything nearby. Consequently, victims often have dozens to hundreds of stings. This behavior is unique to RIFA.

Other ants will either not swarm out of the nest en mass, will not rapidly climb objects en mass, will run away from the disturbance, or will ignore it. Tropical fire ants are less aggressive than RIFA and victims will generally have only a few stings.

STINGS:

A RIFA sting results in a red swelling followed by a small blister, followed by a white pustule. White pustules form at each sting site within 24 hours and last several days.

A Tropical fire ant sting generally causes only a small red swelling.



NESTS:

RIFA nests are “mounds” of soil that are highly variable in appearance. However, their mounds have no visible opening, are often dome or cone shaped, and are usually built in sunny areas.

Other species may have mounds with a single central entry hole. Tropical fire ants may form small dirt piles that look similar to very young RIFA mounds.



HABITAT:

RIFA are found in most environments.

Tropical fire ants are generally restricted to dry coastal areas.