

Flying ants commonly come out on exactly the same day in different locations in the country. We need your help to study whether flying ants appear at the same time in the north and the south of the UK, and to investigate what weather conditions encourage ants to fly.

Why do ants fly?



Each summer huge numbers of flying ants suddenly appear around the UK. This happens when young queens leave the nest to found their own colony, and we need your records to learn more about this amazing phenomenon.

The flying ants you encounter in your town or garden are almost certainly the black garden ant (scientific name: *Lasius niger*). Their nests have a single queen and typically around 5,000 workers, although there can be as many as 15,000.

The ants you see throughout most of the year are workers, collecting food for the colony. Workers are all female and will be alive as adults for about a month. The flying ants you see once a year are males and young queens.

Each year, normally in July or August, huge numbers of flying ants suddenly appear. Queens can live for over 10 years and spend most of their lives in their nest. New queens, however, will leave to mate and found a colony of their own. This 'nuptial flight' is why ants fly.

Ants mate during flight, so males and young queens both have wings. If you look carefully at flying ants you will see some are much larger; these are the queens. The large numbers of flying ants which appear in a short space of time increase the chance of reproduction: there is a very high chance a queen will encounter a male from another nest.

Once the males and immature queens have mated, the queens then try to start a new nest. The queens lose their wings, and after a 'flying ant day' you can sometimes see large ants walking around on their own. These are new queens looking for somewhere to set up their nest.

The males generally only live for a day or two after the mating flights. Males are only produced during 'flying ant season' and don't do any work in the nest: their only job is to mate with new queens.

Black garden ants nest underground, and the first thing the queen does is to dig herself an underground chamber. The ants' tunnelling activities play a vital role improving soil quality. In this chamber the queen lays her first eggs. The egg hatches into a larva which feeds up then pupates and emerges as an adult ant. The queen won't eat any food until the first adult worker ants emerge and leave the nest to collect food.

The queen is not in charge of the workers: her job is to lay eggs to create more workers, as well as new queens and males. Ants are able to form the very organised feeding trails you see by using pheromones (chemical signals) to communicate.

Some colonies of black garden ants will farm aphids for the sugary honeydew they excrete. They are also predators and scavengers, and will eat insects, spiders and other small invertebrates. Nectar from flowers is another common food source.

Flying ants provide a vital food resource for many species of birds, particularly swifts and gulls. Some people find it is the sudden appearance of gulls that tells them it is flying ant time again.