

# This Ain't Your Grandpa's Ant!

By Erin Bishop, Outreach Specialist, O'ahu Invasive Species Committee



Photos by Alex Wild

The holiday season is one of the busiest times of year for arrivals on O'ahu. Families travel thousands of miles to join together in celebration. However, this past holiday season brought with it a most unwelcome traveler to our island...the Little Fire Ant (*Wasmannia auropunctata*). This pest's ominous acronym, LFA, will soon become commonplace in the media, for efforts at island-wide detection and control are currently underway.

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The presence of LFA was confirmed on December 26 at a garden shop on O'ahu. Just three days earlier, Maui had confirmed reports of LFA at a garden shop as well. The Hawai'i Department of Agriculture (HDOA) believes LFA were transported on hapu'u logs from Hawai'i Island, where the invasive ant has been established since 1999. Maui has confirmed just one infested hapu'u log,

and surveys of nurseries and landscapes have yielded no new LFA reports. On O'ahu, HDOA has traced some of the original logs to ten nurseries or garden centers and have treated all of these known infestations. However, there are still an estimated 1,000 hapu'u logs unaccounted for, which could potentially have LFA. Moreover, HDOA continues to find LFA at interisland ports in plants, cut flowers, foliage, and other materials shipped from infested areas.

LFA may be tiny, about 1/16 of an inch, but don't let their size fool you. They pack a powerfully painful sting that can last for days. LFA aren't restricted



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to nesting on the ground, but also find suitable nesting habitat in trees. A slight breeze or nudge causes the ants to rain down and sting whoever is below, which is of great concern to the agricultural sector and hikers. They have also been known to sting pets and livestock in their eyes, causing clouded corneas and even blindness. LFA poses a serious threat to both tree and ground nesting birds, whose eggs and nestlings are already susceptible to other invasive pests.

The keys to stopping LFA from becoming established are detection and reporting. If you have purchased plants from a local garden center or Hawai'i Island within the last year or suspect LFA, get out your peanut butter and chopsticks and catch 'em! Smear a thin coat of peanut butter on a chopstick.



Photo by Cas Vanderwoude

*LFA can find suitable nesting habitat in trees. A slight breeze or nudge causes the ants to rain down and sting whoever is below.*

Place the chopsticks within four feet of each other in, and around, the target area. Wait about an hour, then check your chopsticks. If you suspect LFA, seal the chopstick in a plastic bag and put it in your freezer for 24 hours to kill the ants. Make sure to put your name, address, phone number, and date on the plastic bag. Mail the specimen to the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture for a positive ID, or drop it off at 1428 S. King Street, Honolulu, HI 96814. Please note on the envelope that it is a potential LFA specimen. For more information about LFA, visit [littlefireants.com](http://littlefireants.com).