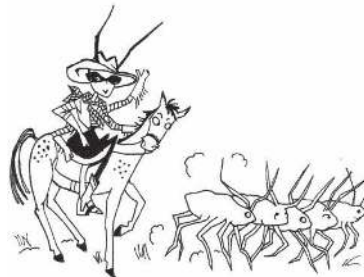


Ranching Ants and Callus Bees

By Cass Turnbull

Many people know that absent-minded squirrels are responsible for the transport and planting of all sorts of tree seeds, commonly referred to as nuts. But did you know ants are responsible for moving your hardy cyclamen around the yard? Ants pick the seeds and carry them home to eat the sweet, sticky coating. Then they discard the seeds like you might discard an apple core or cherry pit. In this case, the seed that is tossed out becomes a new hardy cyclamen plant.

Ants are also aphid ranchers. They will herd aphids to the end of a plant shoot, where they graze on the soft tip. As they do so, the aphids poop a substance we call honeydew. The ants then feast on this post-consumer waste because it is nutritious and sweet. We all know how ants love sweet. I was all in favor of ants corralling, and thus confining, aphids until I read that, on occasion, they will transport some of their livestock to a different plant to start a new aphid herd.



I was surprised to learn that most all of the ants in a colony are female. They do all the work, just like honey bees. Honey bees have their own set of interesting behaviors. Their hives are pretty female centric. In *Beekeeping for Dummies*, Howard Blackinton explains this: "Bee mating occurs outside of the hive in mid-flight, 200 to 300 feet in the air. [Ed note: how do they know that?] This location is known as the "drone mating area", and it can be a mile or more away from the hive. The drone's big eyes come in handy for spotting a virgin queen taking her nuptial flight. The few drones that do get a chance to mate are in for a sobering surprise. They die after mating! That's because their sex organ is barbed (like the worker bee's stinger). An organ inside the queen called the "spermatheca" is the receptacle for the sperm. The queen will mate with several drones during her nuptial flight. After mating with the queen, the drone's most personal apparatus and a significant part of its internal anatomy is torn away, and it falls to its death.

Once the weather gets cooler and the mating season comes to a close, the female workers will not tolerate having (the remaining) drones around. After all, those fellows have big appetites and would consume a tremendous amount of food during the perilous winter months. So, in cooler climates at the end of the nectar-producing season, you will see the female worker bees systematically expelling the drones from the hive. They are literally tossed out the door." How cold is that! ▲