

# SAVE A HORSE, KILL A **FIRE ANT**

Nick Aslani decided to specialize in treating horse farms because of the demand for fire ant treatments at such accounts.



**W**HEN NADER “NICK” Aslani emigrated to the U.S. from Iran in 1978 — just six months before the Islamic revolution — little did the 16-year-old high school student realize that his interest in plant science would lead him toward a career as a highly sought after fire ant control expert in northern Florida.

The lessons Aslani learned while spending time on his maternal grandfather’s farms in Iran have served him well. After graduating from a Miami high school, earning an agronomy

degree from the University of Florida in 1985, and working his way up to service manager for Orkin, Aslani founded Marion Pest Control in 1991.

“I had certain ideas in my mind about how a business should be run,” he says. “I wanted to concentrate on customer satisfaction.”

Slow, controlled growth has enabled Aslani to employ his wife, Sarita, and son Alex in the family business.

In its first several years of existence, Marion Pest Control’s primary market was residential service — treating for ants, termites and general household pests in the north-central Florida cit-

Fire ants meet their match in North Florida horse country

BY **LEE BLOOMCAMP**

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ies of Ocala and Gainesville. (Ocala is located in Marion County, hence the name of the business). However, in 2000, Aslani made a calculated decision to take on a new breed of client: horse farms.

The Ocala area is considered to be one of the premier locales for thoroughbred horse breeding and training farms in the world. More than 200 facilities are located in Marion County. Aside from the equine residents and the people who love and live near them, the farms also host a far less-welcome guest: the red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*).

Fire ants present a huge liability issue for horse farms because the aggressive invertebrates can injure or even kill newborn foals, and cause general health problems for valuable adult horses. The venom released in a sting from a fire ant causes a painful pustule and can lead to secondary infections. Contrary to popular belief, fire ants don't just bite their victims; they use their mandibles to grasp their victims' flesh while using a stinger on their abdomens to inject venom.

Even more troublesome is the fact that, instead of a single ant sting, fire ants typically swarm their prey before they actually attack — which results in hundreds of painful, debilitating stings. Fire ants are efficient predators and will attack humans, ground-nesting birds and animals, and any other insects, including harmless native ant species, in their territory.

Black and reddish brown in color, fire ants typically nest in the ground, topped by low, 2- to 3-ft.-wide, pyramid-shaped mounds that can have multiple entrances and extend several feet into the soil. Depending on the size of the colonies, there can be as many as 150 mounds per acre. On a property the size of a typical horse farm, this means fire ant populations can get out of control quickly if preventive and curative steps aren't taken regularly to rid the property of the pests.

Ground vibrations can trigger defensive attacks from fire ants. On a horse farm, normal feeding and move-

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### TOP 5 TIPS FOR RED IMPORTED FIRE ANT CONTROL

**1 Make sure you are dealing with fire ants.** Pocket gophers, harvester ants and other critters can make piles of soil similar to those made by fire ant colonies. Disturbing the mound with a stick or a quick kick will bring fire ants to the surface if they're present.

**2 Make a long-term commitment to fire ant control.** In many areas, the only way to keep properties free from fire ants is a year-round control program. Without regular treatments, fire ant populations will rebound quickly from the arrival of new, winged queens; invasion from adjacent property; and introduction of fire ants in sod and landscape materials.

**3 Consider an integrated pest management (IPM) program.** An integrated program includes spot applications to existing colonies and broadcast baits. Mound treatments with contact insecticides are effective in small areas, but it's easy to miss small colonies or do an incomplete treatment when you're working with large areas. Baits are easy to apply and eliminate the possibility of overlooking small or hidden colonies. When starting a control program on a new property that's heavily infested with fire ants, use bait first, then follow up in one or two weeks with insecticide treatments to active mounds to provide a short-term reduction in populations.

**4 Be careful when storing and applying fire ant bait.** Fire ants are discriminating feeders. Always keep fire ant bait away from other pesticides and fertilizers. Use a spreader that's dedicated to bait application only. Dust left in the spreader from fertilizer or granular pesticides can contaminate bait and be detected by fire ants, causing rejection.

**5 Consider using biological controls.** Biological control agents, such as phorid flies, have been established in some areas and are helping to reduce fire ant populations. The flies are parasites of red imported fire ants and have been effective in reducing populations in areas where they've been introduced.

To learn more about red imported fire ants, visit:

- [http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/creatures/urban/ants/red\\_imported\\_fire\\_ant.htm](http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/creatures/urban/ants/red_imported_fire_ant.htm)
- <http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/animals/rifa.shtml>
- <http://fireant.tamu.edu>



From left, Nick, Alex and Sarita Aslani make fire ant control a family affair.

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ment by the horses can disturb the ants.

Fire ants are a particular problem because they sting the foals, which are sensitive to the venom. The horses cost a lot of money, so protecting them is a priority, Aslani says.

When Aslani made changes in his business model to cater to horse farms, he found plenty of work. Currently, of Marion Pest Control's 300 customers, about 90 percent are horse farms. The other 10 percent of his accounts are those who remain from when he first started his business.

Although Aslani hasn't actively pursued the residential market in almost 10 years, many horse farm owners are former residential customers, so he still treats their properties as a matter of convenience and in the name of good customer relations.

Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, one of the largest equine veterinary practices in the world, has been a customer of Marion Pest Control for more than 10 years.

"Fire ants are an issue when you're dealing with horses in fields, such as we

do on a daily basis," says Paul Vrotsos, chief executive officer of Peterson & Smith. "The foals and staff attendants particularly are susceptible to bites. For a young horse, the blisters and sores caused by the bites can be traumatic."

Because of the size of most horse farms, Aslani and his son use two ATVs, mounted with spreaders, to make broadcast applications of Award insect growth regulator (IGR). For Aslani, this is an effective method of delivering the product because fire ants forage as far as 100 feet from their mounds.

Aslani has used the insecticide as fire ant bait exclusively since 1994 to treat for residential properties and horse farm customers. As one of the few products labeled for use on horse farms, Award normally takes two to three months to completely destroy fire ant populations.

"I saw results after five weeks," Aslani says.

Because fire ants don't possess the ability to swallow solid food, they take the bait granules (which have been soaked with oil that carries the active ingredient fenoxycarb) back to the

mound, where it's pulverized by the ants. The ants ingest the active ingredient-laced oil and regurgitate it to larvae, the queen and other workers in the mound. The bait product eventually destroys the fire ant population because, as the queen ingests the IGR, it inhibits her ability to produce healthy eggs and the multitudes of worker ants needed to carry out the daily activities that are vital to the colony.

As with most ant species, fire ants maintain a strict social order. At the top of a fire ant society sits the queen. Her primary job is to produce the thousands of eggs needed to maintain the colony population. Fire ant queens mate with short-lived winged males during their nuptial flight. After insemination, the queen is fertile for the rest of her life, which can be as long as eight years.

A mature queen fire ant can eventually lay as many as 1,200 eggs per day. When establishing a colony and the first eggs hatch, the initial group of workers emerges from the mound and immediately forages for food for the

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queen and larvae. After just six months, the fire ant colony can grow to several thousand workers and feature a mound that can be identified easily in a field. Colonies of this size can contain more than 200,000 large, medium and small workers — all infertile females.

The primary job of the younger and stronger worker ants is to care for immature ants and the queen. As these workers age (they have about a two-month life span), they move to different roles in the colony and are tasked with building and repairing the mound. In the days and weeks before they die, the workers are sent to the outside world to search for food because it's the riskiest activity for worker ants.

Fire ants aren't picky eaters and are attracted to such things as dead animals, worms and other insects, as well as any living animals that can't escape their

attacks. Because of their broad-ranging foraging behavior, a broadcast baiting program such as the one Marion Pest Control uses on the horse farms is effective.

Aslani is realistic when it comes to controlling fire ant populations on his customers' properties.

"We automatically broadcast Award every six months," he says. "After each application, I go back to the property to see if they're taking the bait, but a fire ant swarm may eventually reinfest an area. That's why we need to keep on top of it."

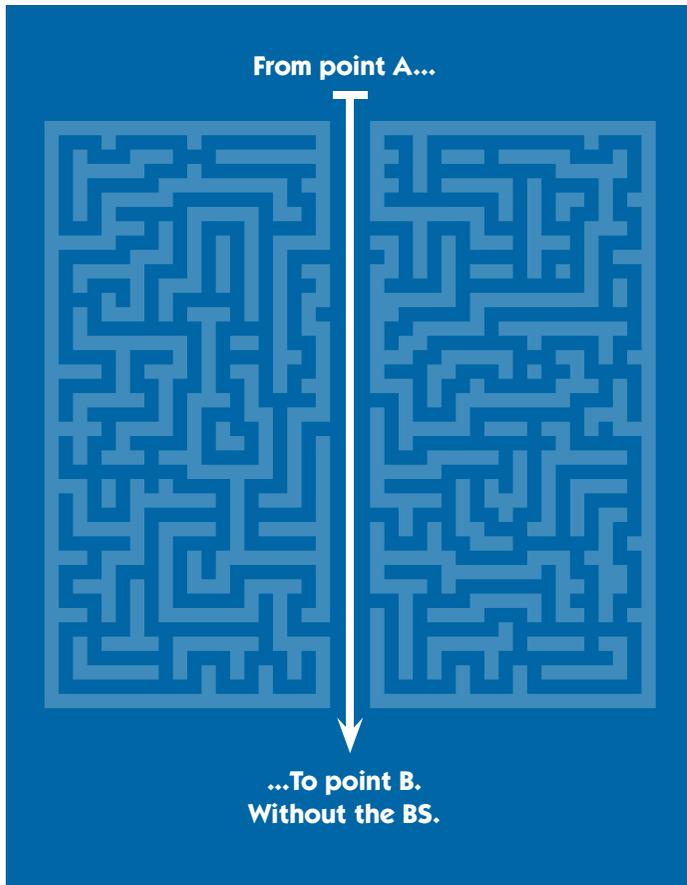
Though his client roster has changed dramatically in the 18 years since founding his business, Aslani has always made customer satisfaction a top priority.



"I've deliberately kept my business small to ensure good contact with customers," he says. "We emphasize customer satisfaction and treat everybody the same, regardless of size. I have a love and passion for the industry, and believe that when you promise a customer something, follow through. In fact, do better than you promised." **LM**

*BLOOMCAMP is a territory manager for Syngenta Professional Products.*

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