

A CHANTANT ANT ANTHOLOGY

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Editor's Note: For a related article, see Robert Layton's "Ants Are All Over" in the May 1995 Word Ways.

Of the trillions of insects that crawl over this earth, the lowly ants are the most ubiquitous, conspicuous, and universally recognized. They have also been in the news lately. A Harvard professor recently won a Pulitzer prize for his book about ants and their societal behavior. Not long ago, a Science magazine article revealed that a species of leaf-cutter ants has been gardening fungi for 23 million years. So they're not only everywhere, they've been there forever.

To learn more about the various kinds of ants, I turned to my front line source of information, the dictionary. Sure enough, I found several ant words that describe the antics of the many members of this underfoot family of formicidae. For example, there's the adamant, which has to be the first ant on this planet--the one with the original sin of picnic crashing. There's also the dormant, a species found in the living quarters of college campuses. Then there's the toxicant, an extremely poisonous variety, related to the carcinogenic malignant. I also found the expectorant, mordant, buoyant, luminant, informant, colorant, compliant, verdant, elephant, and depressant for species of ants that spit, bite, float, grow, squeal, blush, follow, are green-colored, oversized, and underfoot. Other varieties include pageants, the scourge of librarians; peasants, a vegetarian variety; the easily-riled reactants; the gallant, a very pushy species; and the flatus propellant, a particularly malodorous bug. Luckily, this last type is naturally countered by three other varieties: repellants, deodorants and disinfectants. By the way, those prehistoric leaf-cutters mentioned above are called defoliant.

There are many different kinds of ant colonies as well. Antarctica, for example, is a colony populated by ants that can survive in a cold climate--like the coolants, the refrigerants, and the sealants. Closer to home, there's a colony indigenous to an Eastern state called the pennants. In Europe, there's a geeky variety in northern Belgium called Antwerps and a flying French ant called a concordant. There's even an ant word for a stowaway species found on the space shuttle--exorbitant. Any non-native ant is, of course, an important.

Life in an ant colony is remarkably familiar. They have their weirdos such as the misdirected militant, the secretive sectant, and the spell-