Invertebrate Pets

Last Modified:

Invertebrates are animals without a vertebral column. They include snails, slugs, insects, isopods, scorpions, spiders, and many other land- and sea-dwelling animals. Invertebrates may be interesting to keep as pets in a terrarium, but many are illegal to own because they could harm U.S. agriculture and the natural environment if they escape.

Please contact USDA Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program before buying a land-dwelling invertebrate. You may require a permit to buy it, or it may be illegal to possess the invertebrate because it could pose a serious danger to U.S. agriculture or the environment. Although many vendors in the United States may have Federal and State permits to sell approved invertebrates, don’t take chances—reach out to us to find out if it’s legal to own:

Call: (301) 851-2285, or toll-free (866) 524-5421
Email: Pest.Permits@usda.gov

We also suggest you learn about the PPQ 526 Permit, which covers the importation and interstate movement of invertebrate animals.

Expand All

A Message to Ant Keepers, Importers, and Sellers

USDA regulates the importation and interstate movement of ALL ant species because they can be serious plant pests. If certain non-native ant species become established in new areas, they could outcompete native ants, harm native plants, reduce biodiversity, damage crops, and cost millions of dollars to the government and industry due to plant damage or to eradicate or control them.

As a responsible ant keeper, importer, or seller, you must do everything you can to prevent the introduction of new invasive species. If you are moving ants between States, importing them, or selling them interstate, you must have a valid PPQ 526 permit. You can learn how to apply for a PPQ 526 permit on our eFile web page. Select “PPQ-526” from the dropdown, and then click “Get Started.”

Purchasing ants is legal if the supplier has a valid permit to sell the species you want to buy and it is allowed to be shipped to your State. To verify this information please email Pest.Permits@usda.gov.

Please verify the identity (taxonomy/species information) of the ants you purchase by posting pictures on the many available ant ID groups. There are numerous online communities, books, and resources to help you perform an ID. Be sure to ID the species of each purchase/shipment. Never trust an online vendor who claims their permit is valid without verifying it with the proper authorities.

When you import ants from an online vendor, you are the importer on record, and it is your responsibility to obtain required permits. Overseas vendors may not be aware of USDA import regulations and requirements.

Violating any laws associated with the movement or release of ants may result in substantial civil or criminal penalties. USDA may cancel all current permits you have and deny future permit applications. USDA's authority to regulate plant pests is described in CFR Part 7 § 330.200. Penalties for violations can be found in Title 7 of the U.S. Code (7 USC 7734).

Capturing local ants is the best practice for becoming an ant keeper. Although this may require more effort, you will not need a USDA permit and will learn much about their biology. To time your search for ant flights, visit AntFlights.com, a worldwide registration system for ant nuptial flights. There are various community resources to identify local ant species and help you locate ant flights in your area. If you are not

sure what ants are native to your area, you may find www.antmaps.org to be a good resource. This is always a better alternative than trusting an anonymous online vendor, and you might even catch an unexpected queen!

NEVER release ants into the environment, whether they were locally captured, purchased, or imported. If you wish to dispose of your ant colony the best and simplest way is to euthanize them by placing them in a freezer for over 24 hours. While this may seem harsh, there have been many instances of ants becoming established in an environment and causing great harm to humans, animals, and the ecosystem.

Isopod Enthusiasts

Isopods are an order of invertebrates that belong to the crustacean group of animals, which includes crabs and shrimp. Isopods can live on land or in water. Land-dwelling isopods can damage crops and ornamental plants. You are required to have a PPQ 526 Permit to legally own many species of isopods, so contact PPQ before buying these invertebrates.

For more information, email Pest.Permits@usda.gov.

Isopod, Photo by squeebcreative, stock.adobe.com.

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