

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Leaf Cutter Ants

by Mikki Sadil

In the tropical rainforests and sub-tropical forests of Central and South America lives a species of ants that could be the smallest recyclers on earth. They are Leaf Cutter Ants. These ants travel through the forest looking for leaves, which they cut with their sharp jaws. They put the leaves on their backs and return to their underground burrows, where they chew them into a pulp. The pulp is integrated into a fungus garden. The fungus provides the ants with their food (the ants don't eat the leaves they cut) and their living space, and also provides important nutrients for the plants growing on the forest floor.



A leaf cutter ant can carry almost ten times its own weight---that's like a 200-pound man lifting a 2,000-pound car over his head. The leaf cutter ants live in a highly organized and efficient society with as many as five to ten million ants, and up to seven different categories of work, depending upon the size of the individual ant. The queen is the largest, over an inch long, and her only job is to lay eggs. During her lifetime, she could lay as many as 50 million eggs. The male ants are small, have wings and fly from the colony to mate with a queen, then die soon afterwards. The soldiers protect the colony and defend the lines of ants who are out collecting leaves. Worker ants belong in several different job categories: some collect the leaves, some tend the eggs, others feed the colony, and some even have adapted elaborate behaviors for taking care of the fungus crop by grooming, cleaning, and pruning it. A specialized group of ants are the trash workers, who carry out the old garden material and dispose of it in specific refuse dumps.

This very complex society of ants has an important impact on the tropical ecosystems in which they live, and the lesson they teach in showing how individual jobs all work together for their common good is invaluable to the scientists who study them.

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1. What happens to the leaves that are cut and carried away by leaf-cutter ants?
  - a. The ants place the leaves on the forest floor.
  - b. They grow into new trees.
  - c. The ants place them near fungus on a tree.
  - d. The ants take them underground and chew on them.

2. Complete the table below.

| Type of Ant | Job                         |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| queen       |                             |
|             | mate with the queen         |
| soldiers    |                             |
| workers     | collect leaves              |
|             |                             |
|             |                             |
|             | taking care of fungus crops |

3. If you wanted to see leaf-cutter ants in the wild, where might you go?
  - a. Oregon
  - b. Italy
  - c. Panama
  - d. Madagascar
4. What do leaf cutter ants eat?
  - a. leaves
  - b. fungus
  - c. seeds
  - d. small plants

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Match each vocabulary word on the left with its definition on the right.



- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| _____ 1. pulp      | a. cutting off dead parts of a plant                                     |
| _____ 2. fungus    | b. group of people or animals that work and live together                |
| _____ 3. refuse    | c. soft, wet mass of material; mush                                      |
| _____ 4. pruning   | d. spore-producing organism, such as mold and mushrooms                  |
| _____ 5. society   | e. materials in food needed to keep a person or animal alive and healthy |
| _____ 6. tend      | f. material thrown away; garbage   |
| _____ 7. nutrients | g. take care of  |

# ANSWER KEY

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2. Complete the table below.

| Type of Ant         | Job                              |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| queen               | <b><u>lays eggs</u></b>          |
| <b><u>males</u></b> | mate with the queen              |
| soldiers            | <b><u>protect the colony</u></b> |
| workers             | collect leaves                   |
|                     | <b><u>tend the eggs</u></b>      |
|                     | <b><u>feed the colony</u></b>    |
|                     | taking care of fungus crops      |

**For "workers," also accept "Carry out old garden material and dispose of it."**

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**c** 1. pulp

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**d** 2. fungus

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**f** 3. refuse

**c.** soft, wet mass of material; mush

**a** 4. pruning

**d.** spore-producing organism, such as mold or a mushroom

**b** 5. society

**e.** materials in food needed to keep a person or animal alive and healthy

**g** 6. tend

**f.** material thrown away; garbage

**e** 7. nutrients

**g.** take care of