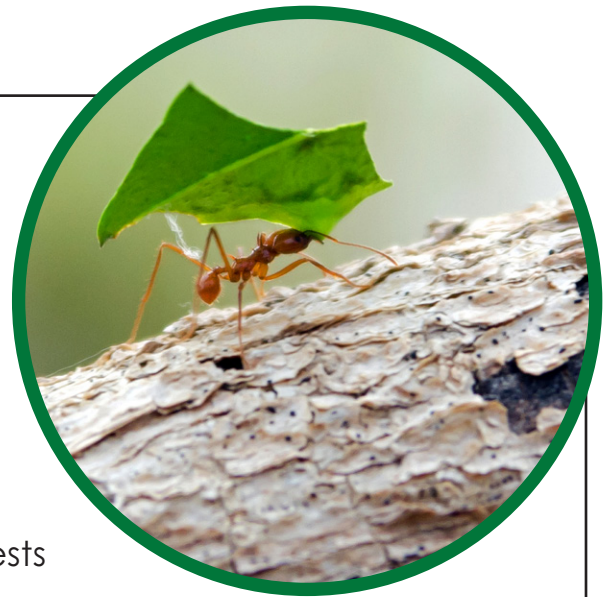


Name: _____

Leafcutter Ants

By Mikki Sadil



In the tropical rainforests and subtropical forests of Central and South America lives a species of ants that could be the smallest recyclers on Earth. They are leafcutter 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 leafcutter 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 leafcutter 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 on 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



A leafcutter ant fungus garden, made from the pulp of chewed leaves that they collect.

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 leafcutter 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
	take care of fungus crops

3. If you wanted to see leafcutter ants in the wild, where might you go?
 - a. Oregon
 - b. Italy
 - c. Panama
 - d. Madagascar
4. What do leafcutter 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	lay eggs
males	mate with the queen
soldiers	protect the colony
workers	collect leaves
	tend the eggs
	feed the colony
	take care of fungus crops

3. If you wanted to see leafcutter ants in the wild, where might you go?

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- b. Italy
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